

Dilemmas in Agriculture

A Personal Story

A decorative graphic of a branch with several leaves, positioned to the right of the word 'Agriculture' and extending slightly over it.

Gorrepati Narendranath

Edited and supplemented by
Uma Shankari

Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam
Delhi | March 2010

Title

Dilemmas in Agriculture: A Personal Story

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Copy Left @2010

Published by

Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam Publication (P) Ltd.

Regd. Office

XC – 7, Saha Vikas Apts., Plot No. 68, I.P. Extension,
Patparganj, Delhi-110092. India.
vasudhaivakutumbakam@vsnl.net

ISBN Number

ISBN - 13978 - 81 - 904474 - 1 - 6

Contribution

India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka: Rs. 120

International: \$ 10

*The cost of the publication amounting to Rs. 50,000 has been borne by
Siemenpu Foundation under the project South Asian Dialogues on
Ecological Democracy; The rest by family and friends.*

The proceeds will go towards future publications in Ground Speak Series.

Layout & Design

Masa Vijay

Illustrations & Cover design

G Samyuktha

Printed by

Sindhu Graphics, Hyderabad

The Groundspeak Series



Information is always processed by the perspective of the analyst. Perspectives that suit the needs and interests of the dominant sections –internationally, nationally and locally – tend to become the dominant ‘knowledge’. A major segment of publications present this top-down ‘knowledge’ as ‘the truth’, whether in the natural sciences, applied sciences or the social sciences. For a wholesome understanding of reality, it has to be grasped through putting together of diverse perspectives from different vantage point.

This series is meant to highlight perspectives from the ground level, realities of the large majority that tend to remain marginalised. Academics, activists, academic-activists, activist-academics, ‘lay people’, lay-activists, lay-academics, all are equally valuable in this exercise of articulating the ‘non-dominant’ perspectives. The publications in this ‘groundspeak’ series will not attempt to iron out the styles of the authors. Thereby they will reflect the academic styles of some, the ‘oral tradition’ of others. They will include monographs of individual authors as well as edited compilations from several. We hope the series will reflect the great diversity of social contexts and positions even within the non-dominant on a wide range of issues that are relevant to a wholesome understanding of our times and an equally relevant praxis.

The first volume in this series was ‘The Urban Poor in Globalising India, Eviction and Marginalisation’ edited by Sh. Lalit Batra, an activist and researcher on issues of the urban poor.

On Narendranath



This volume has been authored by Sh G. Narendranath, edited and supplemented by Dr. Uma Shankari. I have grown with them for the last 37 and 40 years respectively. Sh. G. Narendranath left us for his heavenly abode on 5th July 2010. I am caught in a whirlwind of memories and thoughts that are crossing my mind, so that I find myself unable to express them all. In the context of this volume it will suffice to say that there is an almost total absence of people who, while grappling with the issues of agricultural crisis, are equally passionately committed to other oppressed segments of the marginalized majorities.

My fellow traveler Dr. Onkar Mittal, voracious reader and a sharp commentator, says that this piece of writing brings out the complexities and nuances of the agricultural crisis in a very profound way and yet in an accessible language. Naren was always like that, one who understood the multidimensionality and complexity, paradoxes, dilemmas and richness of life. One who understands life can never be sad, angry or elated; such a person can only be blissful and equanimous. Naren was truly a 'videh', like Janak. Otherwise, it is difficult to explain his undertaking padayatras even at the advanced stage of his illness.

Naren was constantly de-learning what his education, socialization and caste background had taught him. He was a very advanced student of life, living in a truly Gandhian, socialist, green, feminist way. While we all talked and discussed these ideals, he was already living that life. Maybe the powers or the logic larger than our normal comprehension ordained that in such a world and time as prevalent now, it is better to release his spiritual energies from the narrow confines of a single physical body. Perhaps, now his spirit will be more pervasive and assertive than through a single body. I don't even know if I have the standing to pledge or call for striving to follow his example.

Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam friends regard it as a great privilege to publish this volume.

Vijay Pratap
Jai Jagat.

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Dedication

Naren had dedicated this book to

farmers who continue to grow food for the country and show tremendous patience in spite of suffering from wrong development policies,

his father Late G. Ramachandra Naidu, who remained a farmer at heart although he was a high official with the government and his mother Late G. Lakshmi Devi, who encouraged him to “do good” always,

comrade, Late Shri. Kolla Venkayyagaru, who fought for the rural poor till his last breath, and who actively encouraged his work on land reforms....



Acknowledgements



I wish to thank friends Vijay Pratap, Harsh Mander and Vasantha Kannabiran for encouraging me to write my view of the Venkatramapuram story. I am grateful to Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam and South Asian Dialogues on Ecological Democracy for supporting the publication of the book.

Naren's fellow traveler in human rights work, Late Shri. Balagopal, who was suddenly snatched away from us, helped in writing the portion on Jala Yagnam.

Our farming experiments could not have been possible without the cooperation of our workers who cannot however read this book – Lakshma Reddy, Jagannatha Reddy, Munikrishna, Siddiah, Ramu, Annasamy. I am deeply grateful to all my women house-helpers – Late Mangamma, Govindamma, Sampooramma, Muniamma, Vasantamma, Krishnamma...who not only tirelessly cooked and cleaned but also put up with the occasional bursts of my fiery temper.

Our relatives were always there – a great support system in times of need. Particular mention must be made of Naren's aunt, Late Smt. Sundaramma and her son Krishna Murthy, friends Nagesh and Aparna who became part of our family. Naren's brothers, G. Manohar and G. Jagadish Chander and their families had complete faith in Naren's honesty, if not in his management skills! Naren in his turn maintained accounts meticulously and presented them to his brothers every year. This practice was very useful in writing the sections on farm economics.

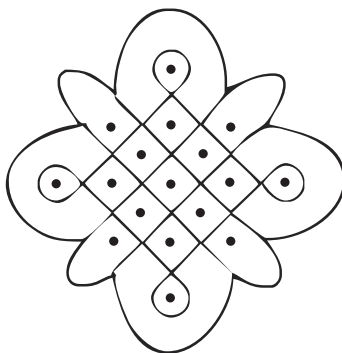
Our work on farmers' issues, particularly, electricity would not have been possible without the involvement and guidance of our elder brother-like Shri Rajendra Reddy, and friends in Peoples Monitoring Group on Power Sector Reforms (PMG). Naren's dalit work and land rights work was made possible by several committed and courageous social workers, movement leaders – whom to name and whom to leave out? Each one an inspiration, they were like brothers and sisters to us. My pen refuses to move without

mentioning at least a few of them – Chenniah, Gettappa, Subrahmanyam, Anjiah, Adavi Ramana, Sunanda. Last but not the least, the officials who helped us negotiate with the system did more than their duty.

Our daughter Samyuktha refused to allow any one else to do the illustrations for her father's book despite her work pressures. Her husband Kiran is deeply interested in sustainable agriculture and assisted him in the SRI operations while Naren was weakened with cancer. Our younger daughter Lakshmi and her husband Somu have been the cheer leaders in this endeavor.

I am grateful to Aravinda for putting aside all her important engagements and offering editorial assistance at short notice. Usha Turaga and her team assisted enthusiastically in the preparation of the book for publication.

Uma Shankari
Hyderabad, April 2010

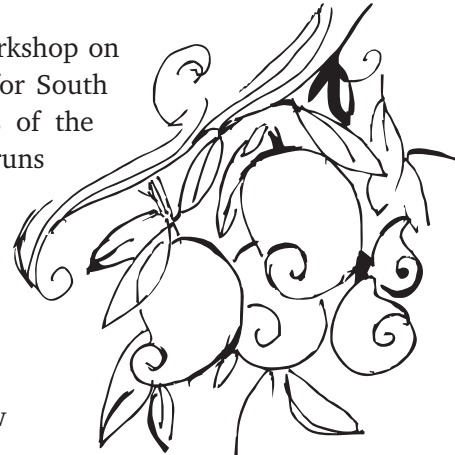


Preface

As they say about democracy, this book is of Naren, by Naren and a tribute to Naren!

The original version was written around the year 2002 by Naren at the request of friends like Geeta Ramaswamy, Uzramma, and Jhumur who urged him to put down his experiences in farming and land reforms work in writing; which he did; and then everyone forgot about it. Naren was too busy in the farmers' movement and his land rights work to think about its publication. This was the time when parts of Andhra Pradesh (including the Chittoor district where we lived) were facing a severe seven year drought; Chandrababu Naidu's regime had hiked the power tariffs for agriculture by 600% to 1200% on the advice of World Bank; against which there were widespread protests by farmers in Andhra Pradesh; and farmers' suicides were happening on a shameful scale in Andhra Pradesh and other states. This was also the time when WTO agreement and our government's utter spineless give-away responses were resulting in price crashes in agriculture; world wide protests against the WTO from farmers were at their fiercest; including the hara-kiri of a Korean farmer at the venue of WTO consultations at Cancun in Mexico.

In 2004 during the World Social Forum in Mumbai, at the workshop on "Peasant Survival Globally" which Naren helped to organize for South Asian Dialogues on Ecological Democracy, about 100 copies of the document were made and circulated. Geeta Ramaswamy (who runs the Hyderabad Book Trust, a publishing house in Telugu) got back to him but now Naren wanted to publish it in Telugu. She got it translated but Naren was not happy with the translation. When he was diagnosed of brain cancer in 2007, Geeta got after him and "ate his head" as he would say, so he wrote it up himself in Telugu and this was published as a book titled "Itlu Oka Raithu" ("Yours truly, a farmer") in February 2009, a few



months before he passed away. Soon after, his friends Vijay Pratap and Harsh Mander thought it should be published in English. I undertook to combine the English and the Telugu versions, revise and edit it. They felt I should also add my view of the story, since it has been a joint journey; this I have now done in italics, keeping the original version intact, except for some minor changes.

As I was working on the book, an image kept coming to my mind. There used to be a poster which I used to like very much, which I saw in our friends Raji and Krishnan's house for many years. The poster showed a photograph of a circus scene: a dog riding a cycle, with a cat standing on its head holding a stick horizontally, with two mice striking a dance pose on either poles of the stick. The words on the poster were: "the trick about life is to make it look easy." That was Naren! He undertook difficult tasks, worked very hard with great drive and energy, faced setbacks with courage and humor, loved and cared for everyone, got confused, believed everyone innocently, made mistakes, laughed at himself and the world a lot, cracked jokes all the time, and was always not just cheerful, but joyful!

He passed away peacefully (not) fighting brain cancer on 5 July 2009 at the age of fifty six.

Uma Shankari

Hyderabad, April 2010

Introduction

“A human environment cannot exist apart from nature, and so agriculture must be made the foundation for living. The return of all people to the country to farm and create villages of true men is the road to the creation of ideal towns, ideal societies and ideal states.”
(Masanobu Fukuoka, *The Natural Way of Farming*).

Uma and I went from Delhi to Hyderabad and then to Venkatramapuram, and settled there for a life of farming and social work in the year 1987. What made me go back to my ancestral village?

I was working in the State Bank of Hyderabad in Delhi. I was bored and frustrated - with number crunching and tallying the accounts daily. On the other hand I was all fire to work for “revolution”, for social transformation. During the five years in the bank (1975-1980) I undertook three rounds of “bharat darshan.” I visited struggle areas, met leaders of NGOs and political parties, and held discussions on various issues. By the end of it I was more confused; neither the NGO style of functioning nor that of the political parties (including the left and extreme left parties) appealed to me (this is not the place to go into reasons for my dissatisfaction). So when my friend Vijay Pratap suggested I join ‘Lokayan’, started by him with Rajani Kothari and D.L.Sheth, and with Uma’s encouragement, (despite despair of my parents) I jumped (with joy) and joined Lokayan.

Lokayan was at that time a project of the Centre for Study of Developing Societies, Delhi. It organised dialogues among intellectuals, academia and activists, and promoted the voices of non-party political and social movements, which were actively searching for alternatives to the present situation. It seemed the right thing for me – a confused soul. At that time both in Lokayan and outside, a series of dialogues were happening on appropriate science, technology, and development, problems with big dams, alternatives to chemical agriculture, non-party democratic politics, secularism, identity based political formations, traditional Indian sciences and technologies, and so

on. We (Uma and I) participated in them eagerly and learnt many things. But after two years in Delhi we started feeling we are saying the same things and we are not moving forward in action. I shifted to Hyderabad in 1982, with my family, wanting to do grassroot public work. I spent the next five years in Hyderabad.

At that time the Srisailem dam was being constructed, and there was forcible evacuation of the people facing submergence. Under Dr. K.R. Chowdhry, we visited the villages and sites where they were relocated and reported on their condition. Three years later we revisited the sites, studied their condition and wrote a document, which was translated and published in Telugu. We tried to organize them for better rehabilitation. It was also the time when Hyderabad was witnessing some ugly communal riots. Along with old city political activists, Andhra Pradesh Civil Liberties Committee activists, Stree Shakti women activists, and a few others, we formed a group called Hyderabad Ekta, and worked for communal unity. We undertook studies, padayatras, cultural programs, and ran a clinic in the old city for about three years.

It was around this time we read the book, “The One Straw Revolution”, by Masanobu Fukuoka. That made our decision- to go back to the village and take up organic farming in our ancestral lands, and to continue our activist/public work. But it took us another five years to actually relocate to the village due to various family reasons. My mother died and Uma lost her father. We had to stay back to look after my father. Ultimately we shifted to the village in 1987 along with my father. My father was a government servant all his life, but a farmer at heart. (He increasingly took the driver's seat once we moved to the village (!) till his death five years later.)

A cocktail of social work, farming and research has not taken me very far in finding solutions to the problems (or challenges) in the agriculture sector. But it has certainly made me more aware of the complexity of the variables involved, their interconnections and contradictions; before finding ‘solutions’, to recognize situations for what they are. Here I put before you the various dilemmas faced by me in various situations. Perhaps I feel more at sea now than when I began – twenty odd years ago – when I went back to my ancestral village. But I know I am swimming in the right direction.

Uma: *It was not my intention to get into any kind of activism; I had decided to pursue an academic career after my PhD in Sociology from the Delhi University; and had joined the Institute of Public Enterprise in Hyderabad; but the sudden deaths in the family and of friends, and the Bhopal tragedy and the Sikh riots shook me to the core; death seemed more real than life; I started feeling life may be too short; whatever we feel is right, we should do today, right now. That is how we decided to move to the village for a life of organic farming and social work.*

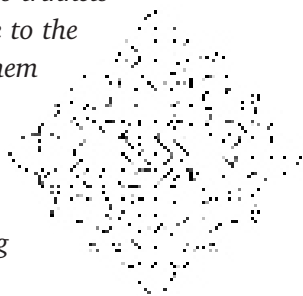
It was a painful decision for us to put our elder daughter, who was ten years old at that time, in a residential school, but it had to be so. We were not confident of home-schooling, we also felt

schooling was important for children, to have the company of other children. The village schools were pathetic, the teacher in our village school was given to drinking, he wrote a lot of stuff on the blackboard, and asked the children to copy them, and went out to socialize with the villagers or read the news paper. We put our elder daughter in the Kalakshetra School in Chennai, and it turned out to be a happy choice. The school was founded by Smt. Rukmini Arundale of the Theosophical Society fame and under her guidance, it was a very child-friendly school, with a lot of music and dance. Our second daughter Lakshmi stayed with us in the village for a few years till she joined her sister in Kalakshetra. Lakshmi had a great time in the village. She went to the village school (by that time the above mentioned teacher had been transferred). She and her friends were never at home, always busy, playing, collecting flowers and berries, climbing and jumping, singing and dancing. The village had several festivals through the year in which they participated with gusto.



For instance, one whole month before the Sankranti festival (which falls around 14 January) the little girls were supposed to worship Gowramma with gobbियाalu. Gowramma is a face made of cow dung, kept on a sieve (used for sieving rice), with a lamp, flowers, etc. In the evenings the children took this sieve with Gowramma door to door, and performed gobbियाalu - formed a circle around the sieve, sang songs clapping their hands, going around the sieve in set rhythmic patters. The songs are funny, mildly erotic in content! Throughout the day they were busy preparing for the evening performance, collecting flowers, learning the songs, etc. The families where they went to perform gobbियाalu donated rice, jaggery, oil for the lamps and some small change. At the end of the sankranti festival, they cooked sakkara pongal (rice cooked with jaggery) and offered to Gowramma. They divided the money meticulously, went for a picnic, usually to a nearby temple, and bought themselves trinkets- bangles and beads. When Samyuktha, our elder daughter came to the village for her holidays, she gathered the children and taught them songs and dances from her school, and they put up shows for the benefit of the elders!

I have no doubt that villages are the best places for children to grow up, with vast skies, open spaces, deep silences, observing nature, and not the least important, studying less!



I wish to start with some questions which are troubling me (Many more questions I have, but the ones below are the relevant ones for the present document)

1. Why are farmers continuing to commit suicide, even while our country is poised to record a growth of 9 to 10% per year, (now down to 6% due to world wide recession) we are having a comfortable foreign exchange reserves, and foreign investors are queuing up to invest in our country? (This was written before meltdown, but things have not changed much for the farmers.) This is in spite of the fact that our governments are introducing various schemes to better the conditions of farmers!
2. Is it a historical inevitability that as we “develop”, our farming population will have to be reduced from 60% to 15 to 2 %, as it has happened in “Developed” countries? If so, where will they go, what will they do? What is the future of 600 million people engaged in farming in our country?
3. In the name of “development”, so many industries, commercial and service sector organizations are being set up, and land, mostly agricultural land, is being allotted to them or being bought by the private sector organizations on a very large scale. Would not agricultural production suffer? Secondly, industries invariably bring pollution to the neighboring lands as well. Finally, such a large scale displacement, voluntary and forced, is perhaps unprecedented; where will the displaced people find employment in the new organizations?
4. If there is good price, the yield is poor. If the yield is good, the price is low. This has been the fate of farmers in general. To add to their woes, under the liberalization-privatization-globalization (LPG) regime, there is pressure to withdraw even the meager subsidies and concessions. Under the World Trade Organization (WTO) regime, uncontrolled exports and imports are resulting in a high volatility in prices. Government is being repeatedly advised by concerned experts and citizens, and farmers are repeatedly demanding the government, often through violent protests, to come to their rescue when prices fall below the Minimum Support Price (MSP) declared by the government. But government becomes deaf and dumb at such times, leaving the farmers to their own devices. How are farmers to survive when they find that whatever the crops they grow, they are in loss and debts?
5. Now and then, just before elections, government declares a waiver on loans of farmers. Is that a solution? Will the banks give loans again? Even if they are forced to, will the farmers repay them or will they wait for the next elections? What about the private loans, which forms the bulk of agricultural loans?
6. What has happened to the crop insurance schemes against drought and flood and other natural calamities? Climate change becoming a reality, the already unpredictable rains will become even more so, are certain to drastically affect agricultural production. How are we going to compensate the losses of farmers?

7. 60 to 70 % of agricultural production comes from ground water based irrigation. While this has resulted in acute water shortages, there is also water pollution to contend with. In addition there is a power crisis as well. How can “free power”, while justified in some sense, solve this problem?
8. How far can “JalaYagnam”, being carried out in Andhra Pradesh, with an outlay of Rs. 1000 Billion (one lakh crore) solve the problem of irrigation? Even if all the projects get completed, will water flow into them? There are serious doubts. However, completion of projects already under construction in a time bound fashion is a welcome measure, for too many projects have been started, and not completed.
9. Climate change has meant even perennial rivers like Ganga and Yamuna are facing threat of drying up. Our forests, which have a key role to play in regulating micro climate regimes, are getting reduced drastically, making afforestation schemes urgent. But a sense of urgency is nowhere to be seen. On the other hand what we are witnessing are plans and programs to exploit the forest and other natural resources, especially the fossil fuels, and mineral wealth in an unprecedented scale, and in an unholy hurry, in the name of growth and development, displacing thousands of farmers and tribal populations.
10. How to get off the train of chemical-industrial agriculture? How to promote organic farming on a large scale so as to feed the nation? Can our large cattle wealth, along with other methods, be used for becoming self-reliant in food production? If organic farming is made both profitable with less drudgery, why won't the farmers take to it?
11. Today in our country 60 lakh or 6 million acres are waiting to be distributed to the poor. 25% of cultivated lands have no legal titles! Where are the left parties? The record so far of land reforms being dismal, how can they be carried out without capturing political power?
12. Today Rs. 2 trillion (2 lakh crore rupees) are being spent to import diesel, petrol and other energy products to meet 75% of requirements. Bio-diesel farms are being propagated, and if they become successful, the farm lands will be converted to bio-diesel farms, affecting food production. How to meet our energy needs without fossil fuels?
13. This year alone our country is officially spending Rs. 1 trillion (One lakh crore rupees) in national security, and unofficially another Rs. 500 bn (fifty thousand crores). Who is being protected from/against whom?
14. In Andhra Pradesh liquor brings revenue to the government to the tune of Rupees Rs. 80 billion. (8000 crores). The sale of liquor must be three times the revenue that is 240 billion (24,000 crores). All this money is the blood of the poor. Women are the worst affected persons when drinking increases. Besides 10, 000 persons

are dying in road accidents, the majority of the accidents being caused by drunken driving. Where have the brave ladies of the anti-liquor movement disappeared?

15. Ostentatious expenditures in marriages and funerals, even birthdays and engagements, are becoming the vogue not only in towns but even among farmers' families. How to restrain conspicuous /ostentatious consumption?

Are you also troubled by these questions and feeling frustrated, helpless? My quest, endeavor is to transform the frustration and helplessness into hope and creative-constructive actions. Towards that end I submit this document containing my thoughts and activities for your consideration.

The document is divided into five chapters:

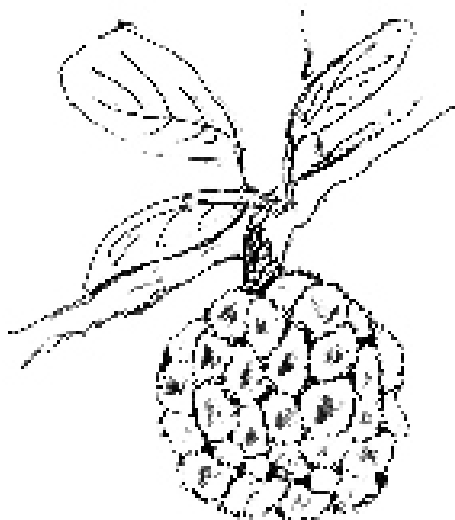
Chapter 1 discusses our experiments in organic and chemical farming, the problems faced by farmers in water, electricity, markets, etc. and our efforts to mobilize the farmers, especially on electricity.

In Chapter 2 we discuss issues related to livestock, forest, healthy food and life style.

Chapter 3 discusses the problems of agricultural workers who belong by and large to scheduled castes, and our efforts to mobilize people against untouchability and pressure the government to carry out land reforms.

In Chapter 4 we briefly describe the plight of artisans and service castes.

Chapter 5 discusses the farming sector in the international context, talks about alternatives, and my thoughts on creative/constructive action we need to do in future.



CHAPTER 1

*Our battles (long live Don Quixote!)
with crops*

The pathetic condition of farmers and rural population is not a new thing in Indian history. This is not the right place to go through a detailed review of agriculture in the ancient and medieval Indian history and the impact of British colonialism on it. Suffice it to say that the British created private property rights in the place of collective /community rights over cultivable land, forests, pastures, water bodies, etc. Before the British, the land did not belong to the king; the king had only rights for a share in the produce. He collected it through the network of tax collectors. Land belonged to the village community and the village leaders parceled the land to individual households, with hereditary rights, collected land revenue on the basis of actual production, which varied from year to year, made payments to the king or the tax collectors after paying the village functionaries - artisans and service castes, and 'public' institutions- temples, educational institutions, free feeding houses and inns, etc. Almost one third of the land was donated to institutions permanently and one third of the produce was spent on village infrastructure and functionaries, and institutions. The British made individual farmers instead of the village community as the unit to pay land revenue directly to the state, thereby undermined the self-governance institutions of the village communities, made fixed assessments of land revenue based on the extent of land owned, in the place of actual production, pitched the land revenues high, to be paid in cash. All these forced the farmers to grow for the market instead of growing for self-consumption and village needs and often most of the produce was sold to meet the revenue needs and the moneylender who advanced money to meet production costs as well as tax payments. (A.R.Desai, 1948. Dharampal, 1998.)

It is well known that the British also systematically destroyed the indigenous industry to promote its own industry. According to Rajini Palme Dutt: "It was during the first three quarters of the 19th century that the main ravages of Indian industry took place, destroying formerly populous industrial centers, driving the population into villages and destroying equally the livelihood of millions of artisans in the villages." (Rajini Palme Dutt, 1947) So that the proportion of the population dependent on agriculture rose from 61% in 1891 to 73% in 1921 and has more or less remained at that level for the next fifty years (73.8% in 1971) but fallen slightly to 68% in 1991. In other words

there was extreme pressure on land due partly to the de-industrialisation policy followed by the colonial rulers.

This has been accentuated by the policies of our rulers ever since independence in trying to extract the surplus from agriculture and invest it in industrialization. The adverse terms of trade for agriculture sector and consequent poor performance of the industries have only worsened the situation. The share of agriculture in the GNP has been consistently falling from 60% in 1947 to 31% in 1991, and to 17% around 2007. A more telling figure is that the per capita availability of food grains in 1905-06 was 549 gms/day which in 1986-'87 was only 470 gms/day rising slightly in 1993-'94 to 491 gms/day.

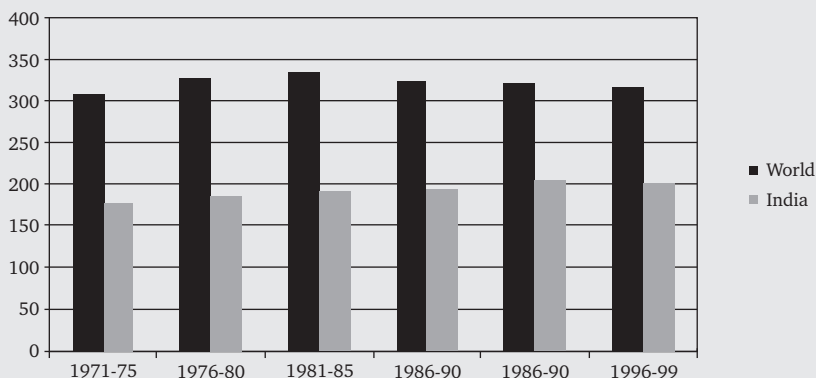
“[T]he disparity ratio between per capita average income of agriculturists and non-agriculturists is now (in 1997-98) 1:5.5. In 1950-'51 this ratio was only 1:2.2. Such fast growing disparity in incomes is neither conducive to faster growth in agriculture, nor even to maintenance of peace and tranquility in the country.

“The share of agriculturists in the national income is now (1998-'99) no more than about one-fourth, while they still constitute nearly two-third of the population of the country. The share of industrial sector in the national income has also been declining in recent years. It is the service sector, which really produces no tangible goods, but which now corners more than 51% of the national income, and provides employment to no more than 17.2% of our total population. Simple calculation shows that the average per worker income in the service sector is now about eight times the average income of agriculturists.

“The green revolution was only a 10 years phenomenon, created under the impact of two factors, first, the introduction of high yielding variety seeds, and secondly the then prevailing terms of trade, which were favourable to agriculturists. If we compare the five yearly averages of food grains production (five yearly average will even out the vagaries of nature) in 1949-54 and 1964-69 i.e. during the pre-green revolution period, we find that the growth rate of food grains production was 2.66% per annum. During the 10 years green revolution period, 1964-69 to 1974-79, the growth rate was 3.34% per annum. During the 20 years of post green revolution period 1974-79 to 1994-99, the growth rate has been only 2.49% per annum... And during the last eight years, 1990-91 to 1998-99, on annual production basis, growth in food grains production has lagged behind even the growth in population”

(Bhanu Pratap Singh, 2001.)

Per capita annual food grains production in world & India on five yearly average basis



From the above chart, it is evident, that per capita availability of food grains in India, during the last 25 years, has always been less than 64% of the average availability of food grains in the world as a whole. This is why, Indians as a nation, are amongst the most undernourished in the world.

Uma: *In spite of all the achievements of green revolution (increases in yield and production) scores of farmers are committing suicides in AP. In Chittoor district farmers are a weary, tired lot today. Whatever they may do they seem to be in losses. The feeling of frustration and resignation is pervasive; the sense of inferiority is profound. Farmers introduce themselves apologetically, much like the women who introduce themselves as “just housewives.” When I saw this I started introducing myself in meetings as a “woman-farmer.”*

It is in this background that I shall try to describe the farming practices in Chittoor district of Andhra Pradesh and our battles amidst them.

“Uttam Kheti- Agriculture is the highest,
 Madhyam Baan - trading is mediocre,
 Adham Chaakri - employment is the lowest,
 Bheekh Nidhaan - begging is wretched.”
 (A popular saying all over India)

Crops in Chittoor District: Traditional and modern

Around 70% of the lands in Chittoor district are dry lands and rainfed crops are grown in them. Only 30% is irrigated as against the Andhra Pradesh average of 35%. Earlier a variety of dry crops – millets, ragi, bajra, jowar, ground nut, red gram, cowpea, bean pea, horse gram, etc. used to be grown. But due to unremunerative prices for millets, people have more or less ceased raising these crops and have instead concentrated on ground nut which is by far the most remunerative of the lot. Of late, during 1997-99, due to imports of cheap palm oil from Malaysia, the prices of ground nut oil and coconut oil also crashed, and people started planting mango in rainfed lands. (There are other reasons as well for increase in mango cultivation which are explained later.)

As a part of the Eastern Ghats, most of the district is studded with hills. The region has no major rivers, or canal projects. However, it enjoys the benefit of both South West and North East monsoons, gets about 900 millimeters of annual average rainfall and is drained by hundreds of rivulets and streams. Traditionally, several chains of small tanks had been built on these monsoonal streams and rivulets, especially during the reign of the Vijayanagara kings; and these form the backbone of irrigated agriculture in the district in the absence of any major river or canal projects. The salubrious climate and easy drainage of water in most areas enables the farmers to raise a variety of crops from pan and banana to sugarcane, paddy, groundnut and flowers and vegetables.

The district has three eco-agricultural zones: the eastern zone, the middle zone and the western zone. The farmers in our area (in the middle zone of the district) grow paddy for one season and follow it up with two years of sugarcane in wet, that is irrigated lands. This is the cycle. There are seven sugar factories in the district but 80% of sugar cane is made into jaggery and much of the jaggery goes for country liquor production. In the dry lands they grow a crop of ground nut inter-cropped with pulses and millets. In the eastern taluks of our district the situation is somewhat different. There the soil is more sandy and there is more rainfall. Farmers opt for a cycle of paddy and groundnut. In the western taluks, the climate is cooler, but there is less water, although the soils are red and rich. They prefer to grow vegetables, especially tomato. While some do grow mulberry (for silk), the proximity of two metropolises close by, Bangalore and Chennai (175 kms and 150 kms respectively from Chittoor), has spurred the cultivation of vegetables like tomato, brinjal, beans and potato apart from flowers and grapes in a few pockets. It has also meant rapid growth in allied activities such as poultry and dairying.

Even within these twenty odd years we have spent in the village, there have been major changes in crops and allied activities, which we will document as we go further.

Our home and farm

Uma: It took me almost two years to feel settled in the village. Although we had a cook and an assistant for house work, I had to pitch in full time in house work. We had to feed the workers, and there was a constant stream of visitors; there was a lot of cooking to do, and other works too, like cleaning, sunning, storing and processing the crop produce. In fact thirty to forty percent of agricultural operations happen at the homestead level.

We had a wood stove in which much of the cooking was done, a kerosene stove and an electric stove, which were used for making tea, tiffins, etc. We did try to use a bio-gas stove, but it was a faulty model and soon stopped working. After struggling for ten years with them, we got an LPG stove, and my life (and the cook's life too!) became much easier.

I now have a “purple” version of woman's work. She is involved in three major sectors: agricultural production, agro-processing, food processing. Not only does she participate in the field operations in agriculture and livestock management, she is also in charge of the agro-processing operations at the homestead level. Plus she is responsible for cooking, churning out three meals a day; day after day; which is actually food-processing. After all no one can eat paddy or brinjal or pulses straight from the field- they have to be made edible digestible and palatable! The village women always gave me an inferiority complex; they had so much stamina and patience, and did so much hard work. Women in their seventies would still be sweeping, cleaning grain and grazing the cows!

Things have changed considerably in the recent years. Joint families have almost entirely broken up; workers are not available for domestic work; children invariably go to school and are not available for field or household chores; dhobis do not wash clothes on a daily basis. In nuclear families the women are having to do everything themselves with no assistance, so that they are giving up tasks like maintaining milch cattle, growing vegetables in kitchen gardens, going to the fields to help out in field operations, etc.

Speaking for myself, I did lose out on research and the company of a peer group and a group of like- minded persons. This indeed troubled me a lot in the initial years. I used to have a sense of “uselessness”, a feeling “I- am- not- doing- anything” all the time.

I felt I was not expressing my potential, nor was I putting my education into best use. I was too caught up in the immediates of my life- household/agricultural chores which were all new to me, taking care of family relationships, and barely able to do anything else. I was indeed trying to do some “research” in water and agriculture related subjects, but it seemed no big deal. Libraries were far away, my mobility was highly restricted due to lack of



adequate public transportation and also due to Naren's hectic schedules, computers and internet non-existent. Naren did not ever forbid me from doing what I wanted, but it was just his busy schedule which left me gaping. Soon I realised this is what happens even in most feminist families and that the woman just has to demand her space, snatch her time. So I did try to do as much as I could.

I was not into street- activism the way Naren was, because both of us could not be so; there were a lot of things to take care of at the agriculture-household-family front. I had a mental table in which one column was Naren, doing ten different things, and on the other column was I, doing nothing but cooking, taking care of the immediate things, and trying to do some reading and writing and make some noise on water and agriculture issues. Then suddenly one day it dawned on me that I was doing as much as Naren, for I was not just providing a loving home for him, not just managing the farm along with him, and taking care of lot of logistics, but I was mentally engaged with all the issues as much he was, I was reading a lot, and I was a very good sounding board for him-a friend, philosopher, (severe) critic and a guide indeed! From that day on I stopped worrying about my "uselessness." Soon I also realised that while reading provides more information and a glimpse into other people's thinking, it can not be a substitute for one's own thinking and feeling and meditating through an issue, for which I had plenty of time! So I stopped feeling "illiterate" and uninformed! In any case I believe in a democracy "lay" public's perceptions should matter and I have always stood for "ordinary" people's right to dissent. When we started our protest against power tariff hike, we did not know anything about electricity matters; we just had a strong feeling that such a steep hike was wrong.

Our 32 acre farm is the joint property of three brothers. (Two brothers reside in Hyderabad; I managed the farm and the profits and losses were shared equally I was to get Rs. 36,000 per year for management and agricultural expenses at the household level, such as feeding the farm workers, processing of crops at the homestead, maintaining cattle, etc.) Out of 32 acres we have 22 acres of mango garden in one side and another 2 acres of mango garden in another side of the village. Mango trees number about 600, mostly of Totapuri and Neelam varieties, but also Alfonso, Malgovala and other special varieties, not always well known outside the district. Altogether we have 25 varieties of mango, each with its own taste and flavor. Inside the mango gardens we have 600 coconut trees. We have two and a half acres of wet land under the irrigation tank which has good bore wells for water sources in which paddy and sugarcane are grown. We have another two and a half acres which doesn't have such a good water source; if there is good rainfall we grow paddy and sugarcane, otherwise we grow ragi, jowar and groundnut.

When I took over the management of the farm in 1993, (after my father died) I had a bank balance /reserve of Rs. 1 million (10 lakhs), apart from the Rs. 5 lakhs meant for a trust we started, named "Swadeshi." This money came to us as our share in 2 properties we sold in

Hyderabad. The interest from the Swadeshi Trust money was used for helping poor persons, especially Dalits, to get education, and to spend on health emergencies in the village. We were very confident that we had enough to keep us going through our experiments in farming as well as social work. My brothers did not interfere in my management.

By 1997 we faced a severe drought which lasted for seven years! By 2000, not only due to the drought, but due to various reasons - farm experiments, social work expenses, and crash in bank interest rates, the money evaporated. On top of it I had a debt of Rs. 200,000 (2 lakh). We had a car which was used sparingly. We sold it because it used to cost us Rs. 2000 per month! We used to employ three workers on a monthly salary at home, one for cooking, one for the cows, and one for cleaning and other miscellaneous chores. Feeding the workers was part of the wage payments and therefore we had to cook for the workers as well, everyday there was an average of 4 to 5 workers apart from the three workers at home. Three workers were employed on the farm on a monthly salary basis and another three on a share cropping basis. Altogether our farm of 32 acres supported 6 workers on a monthly salary basis and three on sharecropping basis. In addition farm workers were engaged on a daily wage basis as and when there was need. All these over time got reduced to one worker at home, and two in the farms. On an average I could give only Rs.20, 000 per year to my brothers. If I explain to you why and how it all happened, you will understand how farmers have become paupers- from feeders of our nation to biggest suiciders in the nation!

From Anna-daata (food givers) to Aatma-hatya (suicides)

If the plight of a farmer like me owning 32 acres was like this, how about farmers having 2 to 5 acres? From 1993 to 2005, 250,000 (two and a half lakh) farmers have committed suicide that is 20,000 per year! Share of agriculture in the country's GDP has come down from 50% during the 1960s to 17% now. That is 60% of our population produce only 17% of the nation's wealth. Migration from the rural areas has been on such a massive scale that villages are getting emptied out. People are literally fleeing from agriculture and rural areas. In the next 20 years it is estimated that another 400 million (40 crores) people will come out of agriculture and migrate to urban areas. These farmers may get some money as compensation, but all that money will evaporate because people don't have skills to use money productively. At present with recession raging, employment for all these millions is already doubtful. Even if recession recedes, whether the teeming millions will get regular employment and decent income and a dignified livelihood is a moot question. Although the NREGA has stemmed rural-urban migration to a limited extent, migration continues. So do suicides.

But this has been the history of the so called “developed” nations of the world. In all ‘developed nations’, peasants were deprived of their livelihoods, they moved to towns on a large scale, but expanding industries and towns (which in turn

depended on colonies for cheap resources and labour), were able to absorb them. But today that can not be repeated as colonies have become independent nations, increased automation and mechanization provides far fewer jobs than before. Is there no solution to this? I believe there is.

If the small farmers have to stand on their own feet, they have to come out of the vice grip of chemical-industrial agriculture - the seed, fertilizer, pesticide companies- by taking to eco-friendly agriculture. They have to grow enough food to feed themselves and some cash for other expenses. Nowadays farmers in “developed” areas don’t eat what they grow! They sell the whole produce and buy all their needs from the market. For instance farmers in Nellore, Krishna and Godavari districts sell the rice they grow right from the farm-field itself, and buy “superior” quality rice from the market for home consumption! Needless to say they buy everything else also from the market. The dependence for external inputs for production and external markets for selling their produce and buying for consumption has grown by leaps and bounds. This is what “development” is all about in agriculture. But has it meant a better deal for farmers? They are permanently indebted; they are permanently in losses, as we will see below. In the meantime there is a severe ground water crisis, power crisis, pollution problems, soil fertility degradation, and now a new danger, climate change.

By eco-friendly farming we can address all these problems simultaneously to a considerable extent! We can feed the nation good nutritious non-poisonous food, we can stem groundwater as well as power crisis because good organic farming practices retain moisture in the soils far better than chemical farming, we can improve soil fertility, we can contain water and air pollution, and we can reduce fossil fuel energy use to a great extent.

We are not saying that organic farming can bring about self-sufficiency in food production immediately for the entire nation, but with improved methods-technologies, and administrative-institutional supports, and if we undertake to do it in a mission mode, I believe we can achieve self-sufficiency in agricultural production in the near future. We are also not saying it is easy for the farmers to switch to organic farming. But they can take to it in phases, first try it out in smaller plots, and when they are sure of the particular package of practices, can switch wholly to organic farming. With all the above crises mounting on us, this is the right time to begin – to get off the train of industrial – chemical agriculture. We will have nothing to lose except the desolation of a poverty-debt-pollution- ridden planet!

Annam Bahu Kurvitah: Let there be abundant food

Our tradition recognized that food is the basis of life and society. If a society has to go forward in peace and prosperity, its people should have access to adequate food under

any and all circumstances. Our culture and society supported public feeding through temples and endowments on a very large scale. But all this has changed. Modern farming puts earning money as the primary objective of farming as opposed to growing adequate food first for the farmer's family and then for the society. The British and subsequently our post-Independence government has been encouraging farmers to grow what are called "cash crops," as if to say we can eat cash! Green revolution did bring about increase and near self-sufficiency in cereal production, but this too has been short lived. Today the situation is per capita cereal availability itself has decreased as compared to pre-Independence times.

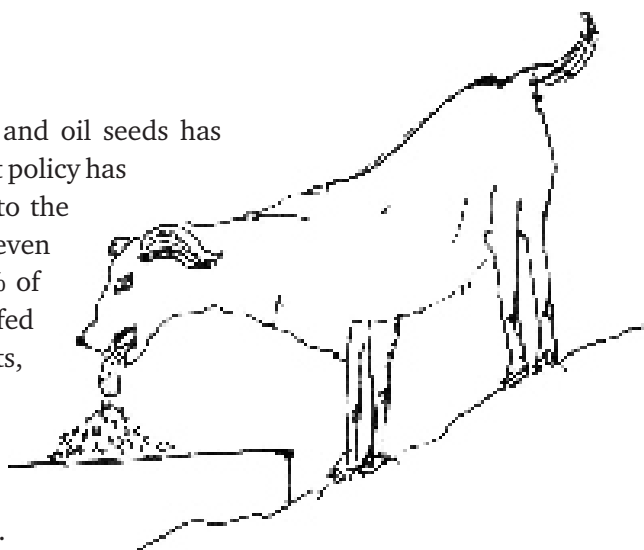
Uma: *In the villages in our area as soon as you enter any home, of any caste, poor or rich, especially around mealtimes, they would invariably say, without any reservation, "come and eat." If the guest accepted the offer and sat down to eat, whatever food was there would be shared. Some extra food, enough for one or two persons, was always cooked. In case food was not already available, some food would be immediately prepared and served. No beggar or worker was ever turned away without some rice or cooked food. Very soon I realised that I too should do the same. For one thing, there are no hotels nearby, where visitors can go and eat; secondly, people often come from far off places and have to travel a few hours by buses, before they reach their destinations, by which time it is time for the next meal! Both my father-in-law and Naren had a constant stream of visitors and sometimes it was vexing for me and our cook to keep on cooking and feeding the workers and the guests, but I realized it just had to be that way! But increasingly this kind of hospitality is becoming a thing of the past, because joint families have broken up,*

workers prefer cash payments; many food crops like pulses and millets are not grown at all, they have to be bought; with food prices being so high, extra food is not cooked at all!

Food is also shared with animals, dogs and cats. Of course all the wastes which the cows can eat are preserved for them carefully for don't they give us milk? Naren had adopted (apart from the village dress code of dhoti and jibba) the practice of keeping aside a small ball of rice called "god's morsel" which he would feed to the dog(s); he would say, if you turn the word "god" around, does it not become "dog"?



In the meantime dryland cultivation of pulses and oil seeds has decreased drastically. This is because government policy has been putting too much emphasis on irrigation to the neglect of dry land cultivation. But the trouble is even if all the irrigation projects get completed, 40% of the cultivable area would still be under rainfed cultivation. Earlier, in these rainfed areas millets, pulses and oil seeds used to be grown extensively.



In Andhra Pradesh ever since the government of N.T. Rama Rao started issuing through the Public Distribution System (PDS) cheap rice at Rs.

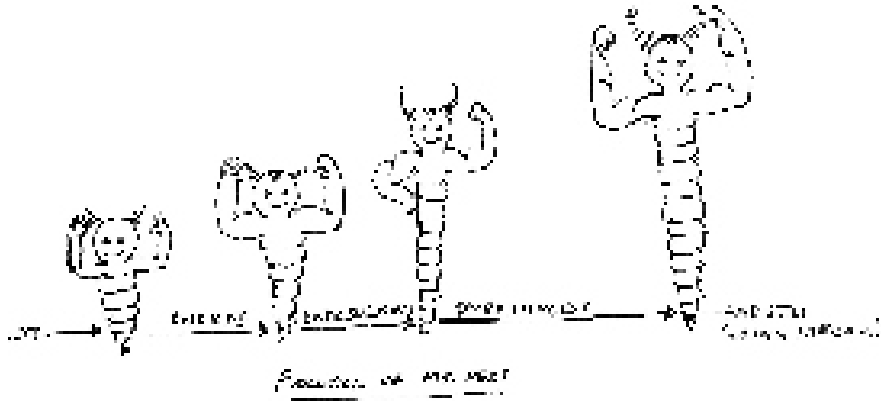
2/kg, people have gradually reduced eating millets, and farmers have stopped growing them too, except for animal feeds. The lower grade paddy grown with chemical fertilizers and pesticides, polished white and stored with a coating of pesticides, made available through the PDS and the mandi, is not only not nutritious but actually harmful for our populace. Concerned people have been crying hoarse since the last ten years asking the government to provide millets and pulses through the PDS, as a way to promote rainfed agriculture and provide nutritious food, but the government has been deaf to all such proposals. It is only this year that the Government of Andhra Pradesh has undertaken introducing millets in the PDS on a pilot basis in the district of Anantapur. However we made it a point to include millets in our food on a regular basis and started growing not only ragi, but also fox tail millet.

Now let us turn to individual crops.

Mango: learn to renounce the fruit of action

Climatically the area is suited for mango. Mango yields well every alternate year. Once a mango garden is raised (in about 7 years) it requires little maintenance and fetches fairly good income. While the income from mango for the last three decades has been steadily rising, the costs have also been rising, especially for spraying pesticides, plowing and irrigation. Of late, the returns are not as much as they used to be earlier (a decade ago). Although the price of mango is highly volatile from year to year depending on the production in the district and elsewhere, it tends to give a steady income in a lump sum annually to the farmer with least maintenance problems. Most farmers sell their mango crops to merchants for one or two years at a time and use the money for some urgent needs such as marriages, house construction or sinking bore wells or for medical bills etc. A number of juice making factories have sprung up in the district (around 25), which are seasonal in operation. Their fortunes also fluctuate with the mango market.

Till 1960s nobody sprayed any pesticides on mango, or for that matter on any other crop. It started in late 1960s with the advent of DDT and Endrin. One spray was enough to take care of all the pests. Soon it stopped working and farmers started spraying Endosulfan, Chloropyriphos, followed by Monocrotophos and Synthetic pyrethroids. Minimum two sprays, one preventive spray before the flowering and one after, are the norm nowadays. Sometimes if the pest attack is severe three sprays are done. All these pesticides are deadly and countries in Europe would not consent to import these fruits. But in our country they are freely eaten, there is no testing, no regulation.



We were afraid we would lose all income if we switched all 25 acres of mango garden to organic farming. Therefore we kept aside two mango gardens in another part of the village, each two to three acres, for our organic experiments. We consulted books, “experts” from various parts of the country and did the following, spread over several seasons: neem cake soaked in water solution sprayed on the flowers; when it didn’t work we mixed neem oil, 5ml to 25ml per litre of water in water with soap and sprayed. Once when we sprayed 25ml/litre, the leaves got “burnt” and withered. Another time we soaked neem seeds, ground them into paste, filtered and sprayed. After that we sprayed cow urine with water solution in the ratio of 1:6. Once we bought factory made azadirachtin solution and sprayed according to their instructions. Another time we sprayed chilly-garlic solution. All these trials had only limited effect in a few seasons; the pest attacks continued. My wife who was a witness to all these trials persuaded me to stop all such sprays and leave the trees to take care of themselves. For a few years this worked. The yields were almost as good as the chemical gardens. But the last two years have seen very low yields. And we don’t know why. Was there too much watering? Was manuring not adequate? Is it due to climate change? For we find rains arrive late by a month in the last few years and there is often unseasonal flowering.

Let me explain the yearly operations of mango crop. Flowering starts from December, goes on till January, and happens in two to three spells. Farmers usually spray a preventive spray of pesticides, followed by another spray after the flowering is

completed; and a third one if pests continue. If the weather is dry, and if there is no fog in the mornings, pests are less. Cloudy, moist weather breeds pests. When the fruits start forming amidst the flowers, watering is done, around once a week or ten days, for the next two months. There should be at least two spells of rains, one around Shivaratri, in late February-beginning of March, and another around Ugadi, late March-beginning of April. These rains will make the mangoes grow in size. From May there are summer showers, which may bring wind storms or hail storms and there may be heavy loss because of fruit drop. From the beginning of June the South west monsoon starts, and fruits may ripen fast. If there are good rains, then worms get into the mangoes!

Fruits have to be harvested carefully; there are special plucking-sticks with nets attached, for if they drop on the ground, they spoil fast. They should be harvested early in the morning and by evening they should reach the market; ideally by next day they should be sold. After harvesting, ideally, the garden should be ploughed, organic manures should be added, trees should be pruned to weed out dead twigs and branches, and if there is no rain, watering should be done once a week or so. If all these steps are done, the trees will come to life and there will be good foliage. The main lesson we learned is that climate is the most important factor, the biggest doctor! Climate can make or mar the crop, and we are utterly helpless when the weather is unfavorable. Our efforts in the form of irrigation, fertilizers and pesticides have but limited effects.

There is also no point in blindly copying organic methods followed by another person in another area. For instance Bhaskar Save, the veteran organic farmer in Maharashtra, grows mangoes, and *sapota*. He does not plough, he does not water around the trees, and he has made two feet deep trenches running criss-cross between the trees, with mulch material, and he waters these trenches selectively. We wanted to try it in our garden, but we realized ground water is just eight feet deep in Bhaskar Save's area, whereas in our area it is very deep, and selective watering during the fruiting season is essential for getting a good crop. However I stopped ploughing the whole garden except around the canopy of the trees, made shallow trenches, and fed them with manure, mulch and water. By not ploughing, I brought down the expenditure from 20,000 rupees to 5000 rupees, but the garden became infested with parthenium weeds, and I spent another Rs. 2 to 3000 to pull them out. Our organic mango garden has another nuisance. Red ants are plenty and workers find it very difficult to climb on the trees and harvest the fruits! These are almost entirely absent in chemical gardens.

Thus every garden, every field has its special problems and one has to tailor our interventions according to specific needs of the trees/crops. The other thing to remember is: every season is a surprise, for whatever we may do or not do, the results are unpredictable. I often feel the Bhagavat Gita message, "do your duty and renounce the fruit of your action" has emerged from the uncertainties of agriculture.

Mango trade is another gamble. Prices fluctuate a lot. Merchants, however, enter into agreements of various kinds, invariably falter, ask for concessions, or delay the payments, depending on the price situation in the external markets. Price falls due to various reasons – excess production, lorry strike, rains in Bombay, Iraq war leading to diesel shortage, Rajiv Gandhi's death, and so on.

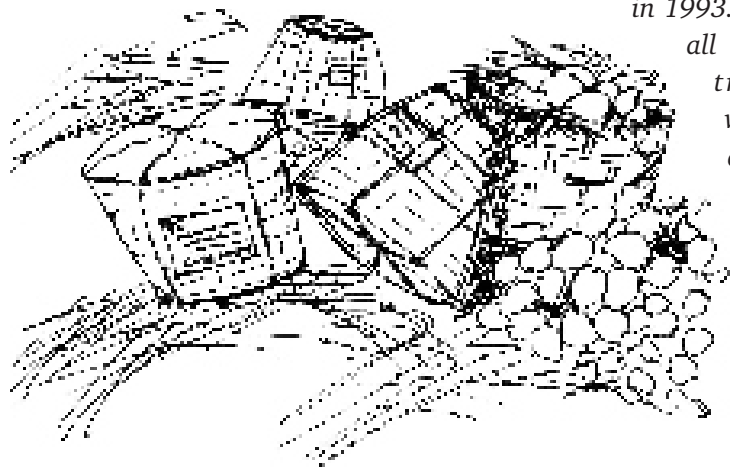
Why have I described mango operations in such detail? To show that although it is considered a relatively easy crop, it has its own issues- chemical or organic. Secondly organic farming is easier for small farms with annual crops, rather than big farms and horticulture crops. Imagine how much neem seeds one would need for 600 trees! And who will soak and grind all that?! Whereas a small farm of one or two acres would need just a drum or two of such mixtures.

Uma: Every year Naren sent mangoes to several of his friends and relatives. It used to be a major operation. You have to bring the mangoes home immediately after plucking, pack them in baskets with straw, write the addresses, take them to Pakala, 20 kms away, in the tiller trailer, book them in the railways, take the receipts and send them by post to the addressees, so that they can claim them at the railway station. All this also cost quite a sum. His friends would often complain that it is a nuisance to go and collect the basket from the railway station and that he need not send the mangoes. But Naren would not listen. In Hyderabad he used to often entrust the job of collecting and distributing the mangoes to Jeevan Kumar, his fellow traveler in the human rights movement.

One of Naren's relatives, an elderly uncle who had grown up with my father-in-law, and was 94 years when he died last year, had a special liking for a particular variety called, "white malgova." This variety was not a common one, but our garden had two or three trees of this variety. Naren sent a basket or two for this uncle every year without fail. Similarly he sent a basket of mangoes to a doctor who treated my father-in-law in Christian Medical College hospital every year, even after my father-in-law passed away way back

in 1993. Within the village he gave mangoes to all the poorer people who had no mango trees/gardens of their own-the washerman, barber, potter, smiths, carpenters, mechanics, school teachers, etc. Some of the officials and functionaries at the revenue department, electricity department, etc. also received our mangoes.

I used to call it Naren's mango diplomacy as I realized that although his friends cribbed about



the job of collecting the mangoes, once they arrived, they loved them, for the mangoes were harvested at the right time and ripened properly and tasted much better than the market mangoes. Of course they also greatly appreciated Naren's affectionate gesture and the trouble he took to send them. Once I was introduced to late Shri Kaloji, the great Telugu poet, and immediately he piped up, "Oh, Mango Naren!"

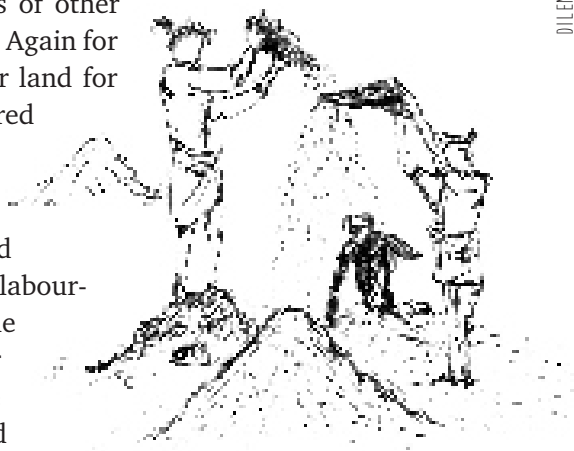
Dr. C.N. Parameswaran and his wife Dr. Sulochana specially visited us during the mango seasons and used to do full justice to our mangoes. It was quite amazing ...this couple were the founder-executive directors of over a 200 bed hospital in Trichur in Kerala. But when they came for a mango-holiday in Venkatramapuram they would neither make nor receive phone calls from back home or the hospital. They would relax, read, go for long walks with us, sit in the terrace under the stars and talk to us; and eat plates of mangoes cut by Naren with great affection. The last time we had a similar mango festival was in May 2007, when we had the NAPM (National Alliance of Peoples Movements) Conveners meeting. About 20 of them finished three huge baskets of select mangoes in two days!

Paddy: SRIVARI

In our area farmers usually grow paddy for self-consumption. It is followed by sugarcane or groundnut depending upon water availability. Chittoor district sugarcane goes mostly for country liquor making, and since I was advocating prohibition, I was in a dilemma – whether to grow sugarcane or not.

Under the “wise” suggestion of Nagesh (borrowed from Uzramma) we decided to stop growing sugarcane and instead grow rice. We used high yielding varieties of the Government, as well as some traditional varieties of other nearby regions (Tamilnadu, Kerala and Telangana). Again for ethical/ideological reasons, we refused to give our land for tenancy farming and tried to cultivate using hired labour.

We ended up paying enormous amounts for labour for two acres. We had heavily invested in organic and leaf manure and groundnut cake which are labour-intensive operations and we ended up spending some Rs.16,000. Our paddy crop was an average yielder meaning as much as anybody else. Most of the farmers are easy going. They do not select their seed carefully. They do not nurse the nursery (treat the seed etc.). They often plant late but try to make up with application of urea and/or NPK. While the crop of paddy we produced was almost equal



to what most of the other farmers were producing (20 to 22 bags per acre, only very few produced 30 to 40), our costs were twice or thrice of others, mainly on labour and organic manures. We were putting double the farm yard manure as others.

I was particularly peeved by the way the dalit workers would bring in their bullocks (sometimes country cows doubling as bullocks) and would do light ploughing so that the bullocks didn't tire. In the end, despite their collection of full wages, the plot would have hardly been ploughed needing another round. Nowadays, farmers are not keeping bullocks, have switched to milch cows, and are hiring tractors and bullocks for their small ploughing needs. So, only some agricultural workers have bullocks, which are over worked in season. Once one of the cows collapsed in my field! This is what prompted me to go in for the power tiller for which unlike the other farmers we paid the full amount as we were not eligible for the Rs. 35,000 subsidy. (We were perhaps the only non-subsidy clients for the machine.) The tiller had its own set of problems and expenses but at least the whole thing was under our control and we could plough the way we wanted although it increased our dependence on outside forces (mechanic, diesel etc.).

Ultimately, the rice we grew was rather expensive and very exhausting as we had to take care of so many vagaries like truant labour, diseases, timely application of various organic inputs (searching for them), timely weeding, proper harvesting and drying and finally storing. We could avoid all this if only we had given our land on tenancy! Besides, if we hired labour we would have to cook the afternoon meal for them and also hear complaints about how badly the meal was cooked! No wonder most small farmers, including those owning one or two acres of wet land, give their land on tenancy. We hardly sold any of the paddy we produced. Most of it was consumed by us and our workers hired for various works. After three years of such expensive experiments we decided enough is enough, and opted for share cropping like the others!

We have been growing organic paddy since 1993, but the yields were always low, whatever seed we sowed, however much organic manures we used, whatever plant protection methods we tried. It was then the SRI (System of Rice Intensification), called "srivari" in Telugu, (can be translated as "auspicious paddy") came like a boon. Developed in Madagascar in Africa by a French Christian priest, it is not a different variety of paddy but just a different way of cultivating it. The philosophy behind it is that paddy needs water but does not need continuous flooding and submergence, as is the usual practice. Spacing between the transplanted seedlings is wide, almost 25 centimeters, whereas it is about 5 to 10 cms in traditional method. The roots grow into a big bunch, tillering is profuse, (30 to 60 to even 100 per plant - once we counted 140 tillers!, whereas in the traditional flooding method there are upto 15-20 tillers), yield is more. We grew paddy in the SRI method in three seasons. The first time we got 20 bags for one third acre, which means 60 bags per acre! Second time we got caught in drought

and our fellow farmers did not give us water, and we left the crop halfway. The third time tillering was very good but yield was medium - 30 bags per acre. We analysed and came to the conclusion that we should have weeded earlier, we didn't because there was not much weed growth. But we were told that regardless of weed growth, early weeding is a must in SRI, since weeding promotes aeration and sunlight. See Table I A for cost of cultivation of paddy.

There are many such lessons we learn in farming but there is no perfect way to grow any crop, for we are dealing with far too many variables which are out of our control, the weather being the most important factor. We are nowadays experimenting with Subhash Palekar's methods (Palekar, 2006), especially with his jeevamrita fertilizer mix, which is showing promising results. We are keen to further experiment with his methods.

Sugarcane and jaggery

The district is known for its jaggery. The jaggery comes in two categories, the white or golden yellow colored, mostly from Aragonda or western region is for consumption and fetches a better price. Farmers have increasingly taken to adding bleaching agents such as sodium thiosulphate, (Hydros) which is prohibited for human consumption! Farmers know it is not meant for consumption, but do not stop using it, saying "we are not consuming it." The colour lasts for a couple of months, by which time the jaggery changes several hands and is also probably consumed. The second variety is of darker even black colour due to the nature of the soil. Generally, soils which are alkaline will give rise to paler jaggery, which though attractive to look is not as sweet as the darker one. The latter fetches a slightly lower price than the yellow variety (by about Rs.100/- to Rs.200/- per quintal). Mostly meant for brewing country liquor, it goes to Maharashtra, Karnataka, and Tamilnadu. It is in high demand and prices soar before elections. But often prices also dip terribly to very low levels.

We have been growing organic sugarcane, and as usual our costs are high, and the local prices do not give us any margin. After much trial and error we have been making it into powder jaggery and selling it directly to consumers like Auroville and ISKCON for a slightly higher price. And that is how we managed to overcome our losses. See Table I C for cost of cultivation of sugarcane and making jaggery. The dilemma in jaggery is that while sugar is unhealthy (glucose and minerals are lost in the making of factory-sugar, which consists of only sucrose), demand for jaggery is decreasing because of the smell and colour.

Uma: *Our next project is to make organic crystal sugar. We are researching on it, of course we will go into some more losses, but the itch is too much to resist! Farmers they say are averse to taking risks. In fact it is exactly the opposite! Farming is so risky that every season, every crop is a surprise! Sometimes it is a pleasant surprise, sometimes it is a cause for dismay and despair. What farmers do is try to minimize the risks by spreading it over*

different crops and seasons through intercropping, and crop rotations. I have found farmers are always experimenting with new methods and new crops, anything which promises greater yields and more incomes, better taste and better looks. In the process they may run into losses, but they take it as part of occupational hazard, after all, even if one takes all the precautions, a rain or lack of it can make or mar a crop, isn't it?

I used to feel amused that farmers always did detailed post-facto analysis: we should have done this, we should have done that, this was a mistake, etc. etc. It was a matter of wonder to me that people who have done farming all their lives did mistakes as much as we were doing. Soon I realized that too many variables were not in our control and only post-facto analysis is possible!

A number of private sugar factories have sprung up in the district, apart from the two major cooperative sugar factories sponsored by the government. As there is enough cane to supply to factories, there is no restriction on production of jaggery, which often fetches a better price than the factory price for cane. Besides, the farmers do not have to run after the factory sugar cane inspector for the cutting order and then wait for the lorry to arrive at any odd hour and search for people to load it with cane. Payments are also often delayed. So farmers prefer to make jaggery.

Vegetables

Vegetables used to be grown earlier for domestic consumption, whatever was surplus used to be sold. Today it has become a specialized crop, with new hybrid seeds, demanding a heavy dose of chemical fertilizers and pesticides. After a few trials we stopped growing vegetables because our workers refused to cooperate. Growing vegetables is very labour and capital intensive. Prices fluctuate a lot. Farmers prefer to grow them in small plots of one or two acres generally. Vegetables and sugarcane crops are the mainstay of small and marginal farmers. As there aren't enough cold storage plants, farmers are often put to heavy losses in vegetables, especially tomato, when the prices crash due to glut in the market. See Table I D for economics of tomato cultivation. Nowadays in our area vegetable prices have soared but still farmers are reluctant because of labour shortage.

Groundnut

It is the mainstay of the dry land farmers, and most marginal farmers double up as agricultural workers. Unfortunately, the crop is very much dependent upon the mercy of timely and frequent rains in the kharif. For every one season of good crops there will be two bad years of heavy loss and two years of bare sustenance. Of late, the cost of raising groundnut crop is also rising, pushing the farmers into greater debt. The brunt of the

price crash due to import of cheap palm oil from Malaysia was borne by these farmers. The yields are also very low – depending on timely rains, from 5 to 15 bags an acre. But the economics are very different in the flat sandy soils of the Eastern taluks of the district where it is raised as an irrigated dry crop in the rabi season with heavy doses of chemical fertilizers, the yield going up to 30 to 40 bags per acre, if not more. See Table I B for cost of cultivation of groundnut. Considering all this, most rainfed lands are being planted with mango. Price of ground nut oil is soaring, but farmers can't grow ground nut, because once you plant the fields with mango, there is no going back!

Government is all the time trying to promote horticulture crops in good crop lands in a foolish manner. Farmers are also taking to them because of labour shortage and high cost of inputs and low prices for annual food crops. But once horticulture perennials are planted, regular annuals can't be grown. Food production is most likely to fall, and prices of food crops will go up, but who cares?

Coconut

Uma: *We have about 500 coconut trees in two different plots in the midst of mango trees. They were planted by Naren's father when water was no problem. With advent of borewells water shortage has become all too common. Added to this was the disease attack, which started about ten years ago, and is still not gone. But the new and latest bad news are the monkeys! Half a dozen of them have settled in our garden since the last two years. They break the tender coconuts and drink up the juice before they develop into coconuts! It is against the wild life law to kill them; it is also against tradition to kill them, for they are connected to Hanuman! The only way is to catch them and leave them in the forest. The only people who have the skill and are officially allowed to catch them are the gypsy tribe called **Guvvalavaallu** (Nari kuravar in Tamil, a tribe whose men specialize in hunting and the women live by making bead necklaces). It is very difficult to deal with them since they live by petty crime and are notorious for not keeping to any agreement and somehow extort money much beyond the agreement. We got them once to set up the traps, they came and spent three days in the garden and got us to spend almost Rs.2000, but no monkey got into the trap! Recently again I went and fixed up a deal with them, but they did not even turn up! I was almost giving up, when I told myself I will try a last time, and I went with an officer from the Forest department and a cousin, to the same persons whom I had given advance money, and this time they did oblige me, came and captured all the nine monkeys! (The Guvvalvaallu set up big cages to trap them, lure them into them by putting bananas, ground nut, etc., and after trapping them set them free in a far-off forest.) We just hope they would not find their way back to our garden!*

With all this our income from the coconut garden has got reduced to one-fourth of what it used to be. Many farmers have cut down the coconut trees and going for other crops.

But we are very reluctant to do that; our coconut garden is such a beautiful place with two huge wells like swimming pools. Naren never missed taking our friends there for tender coconut water.

Choice of crop

Price or profit is the basic motivating factor for the farmer to grow any crop. But he will make the choice of crop depending upon a variety of factors apart from the price, like cost and easy availability of labour in season, ability of the crop to withstand shortages of water supply and easy marketability, disease- proneness of the crop. It is the risk of rejection by the factory (apart from the intensity of labour) that dissuaded many farmers from taking to gherkin cultivation under contract farming for a company in Kolar, Karnataka, although it promised high returns of Rs.50,000/- per acre apart from supply of seed, pesticide, fertilizer and credit and buy-back of the produce at a fixed, predetermined price. It is for the same reasons that crops like sugarcane are preferred to the rest; sugarcane can withstand shortage of water for over a month. Even if one or two wettings are missed or even more, it will still give some crop unlike say paddy or vegetables which will be wiped out; besides it is least disease prone and jaggery making can be managed with family labour with one or two hired labourers, so that even at current low prices, (not counting family labour) one can earn up to Rs.20,000 to 30,000 per acre (gross income). If dairying can take care of the running costs of labour, etc. then one can end the season with a lump sum. This is the main attraction of sugarcane.

Uma: *With the coming of NREG small and marginal farmers have gone in for mango plantations on a very large scale. The NREG pays for the fixed costs of digging pits and planting; with some begging and borrowing from the neighbors, the farmers manage to water the saplings for the first few years. Once they are established they don't need much watering to survive. The second motivation is that since the introduction of NREG, hiring workers has become an expensive proposition, as well as a vexing frustrating exercise, with workers becoming truant and undisciplined. The third motivation is that agriculture does not pay whatever crop one may go for; therefore farmers are in search of other occupations to give an additional income; since mango does not need close supervision the farmers can take up other additional occupations more easily, such as a regular job, trading, etc*

Three (missing) cheers for tenancy

We were surprised to hear that my grand father and my uncles would never give their land on lease/tenancy/share cropping. They always cultivated with the help of farm servants, family labour, and hired labour. But today the scene is completely different. Almost all the farmers under our tank (10 out of 12) with lesser extent under each are

giving their lands for share cropping. The economic non-viability of most crops especially paddy, the problems of ensuring labour supply when needed in season, power supply, etc. have prompted many farmers to go in for tenancy farming even if they have small holdings of one or two acres. Often they give a part of their land, usually 1/3rd acre to 2/3rd acre, to a tenant (by oral agreement) and cultivate the rest by hired labour using the tenant to water their lands and to organize other operations, such as calling labour, making jaggery for the owner (his own labour is not costed). By this method the farmer's income is halved and would imply a net income of Rs.10,000 to 16,000 per acre for sugarcane/jaggery and 10 to 15 bags of paddy per crop per acre. This way the farmer really benefits in paddy cultivation. If he had to do it wholly through hired labour he would end up with heavy losses. But farmers cultivate paddy so that they don't have to buy rice which can become quite an expensive proposition, and secondly, through raising paddy the soil is enriched with organic nutrients making it ready for growing chemically fed sugarcane and vegetables for the next one or two years.

For almost similar reasons the agricultural worker opts for tenancy since he has no land of his own (with water) and there are many like him. By raising paddy (and supplemented by the subsidized ration rice) he is able to meet his rice requirement without having to go to the open market. He does not hire labour, usually making do with a little exchange of labour with his neighbouring tenants. If he were to cost all this labour he would be worse off. He would be actually making a loss. But he too prefers tenancy as it assures him of rice and hay for his cow and bullocks and an assured sugarcane crop for two years. Usually, he would have borrowed advance money from the farmer (often without interest), the farmer in turn borrowing from the jaggery merchant (at an interest of 18 to 24%).

Giving a part or the whole of one's land on tenancy however, does not solve the land owner-farmer's problems altogether. The tenant after the initial heavy schedule of preparing the land and planting paddy or sugarcane has to do only watering most of the time. He prefers to do this at night and go for daily wage during the day which can fetch him anywhere between Rs.40 to Rs.60 so, (today it is Rs.100 to 120 thanks to NREG). The farmer owner has to always keep a watch on whether his fields are being irrigated properly, whether de-weeding and fertilizer application have been done on time and properly, and to ensure that timely and proper spraying is done especially for paddy and vegetables and crushing of cane for jaggery making started in time before the onset of power shortages in summer.

Labour's love lost

The other problem with labour is that they are forever demanding money in advance, promising to come for work. Having used up the money they then try to avoid the person from whom they have borrowed. It is often in such a situation that farmers/ money

lenders physically assault the agricultural workers. The workers on the other hand, unable to make both ends meet (some of them are into drinking as well) tend to borrow from several land owners promising to come for work, so a lot of hide and seek goes on with the workers preferring to go to work for those who are likely to pay immediately. So the lesson is to try and pay immediately after the work is done and not to give advances/loans. But often this is a difficult choice because the workers prefer advances, and the farmer ends up giving a loan as well as paying afresh.

Further, if the farmer himself puts in labour, the workers work better. If the farmer/owner stands around, they work a little less. If the farmer does not turn up at all, then they work even less (20 to 30% less). Farmers lament that workers are no longer as hard working as they used to be. (That applies to the farmers also). They recall that in the good old days they would rise in the early hours around 2 to 3 a.m. and draw the water from the wells using bullocks and “Kapila” – a huge leather sack. In the “good old days” of course, the agricultural worker had little option but to work for the landlord or farmer, the children tending the cattle (now they go to school) and those who were truant (not turning up for work in time etc) were often beaten up. The farmers were also hard working (for they too had little choice of other avenues of earning money or survival). But now things have changed. With the advent of diesel motors and now electric motors, farmers and workers have got used to switching on the motors and since power comes with adequate voltage only at odd hours during the nights there is a tendency to flood irrigate using excess power and excess water (provided of course there is water in the wells). There are also apparently other avenues of work especially in urban areas although it is not easy to get.

The truancy of labour and their short supply when needed (in season), the alienation of both the worker and the owner from agriculture work, the reluctance of the worker-cum-tenant who divides his time between daily wage labour and sharecropping, not doing justice to the latter, farmer reluctant to put in the physical labour required and vexed with hired labour, unwilling to let go of the land - in this situation farmers are forever trying to do with less labour and looking for devices such as labour saving machinery, switching over from labour intensive crops like paddy and vegetables to annuals like sugarcane and banana, and from annuals to perennials like coconut and mango.

Uma: *We found to our dismay that most people in the village of all castes were full of mistrust and distrust of each other. There were lot of lies, falsehoods and half truths, misleading the fellow human beings, gossip and stealing. Soon after I shifted to the village, I stopped wearing a bra! For, every time I hung out a new bra to dry, it would disappear! Tooth pastes, pencils, pens, watch, flashlights, umbrellas, bulbs, pillow cover, bedsheet, cooking vessels, would all disappear. Much later, you would find some of them in somebody else's house! At that time it would not be an appropriate occasion to ask for them. But strangely, cash and gold are not normally stolen. People are always borrowing things,*

especially tools – hoes, spades, ropes, baskets, sprayer, plastic sheets, drums, motors, a thousand and one things – you can be sure they would never be returned! The thinking is: when the owner needs them he would ask for them! With Naren being too soft and generous to a fault, I had to don the role of a toughy. Everyone was all praise for Naren, “Anna is God.” Occasionally I too would hear a left handed compliment – “But for Akka, people would have swallowed Anna and his everything.”

The other strange thing we noticed is that everyone was full of praise for themselves and always warned us about the bad character of others! We slowly realized that people praise themselves, especially workers and women, because nobody praises them! And people, especially workers, tell lies as a surviving strategy; they would never say no to you when you call them for work; they just don’t turn up! They can always give explanations later. In a small community you can’t afford to make permanent enemies, for who knows, you may need them tomorrow. So everyone keeps throwing and gulping the lies and insults, normal speech itself is often rude and sarcastic, but the next time when you need them, you just go make up! Nonetheless, in spite of all the rationalizations, it was often exasperating for us!

City lights and changing crops

There is a growing trend, due to the strains and problems of agriculture, that those who are brighter (or even otherwise) will try to do something outside agriculture, either in allied businesses like selling fertilizers/jaggery/groundnut/mango, or running a petty shop or money lending. An enterprising person may do all of these or a combination of these. The children of the better off are educated often outside the village, in English medium schools and efforts are constantly on to help them settle down in urban areas where it is felt one can earn easy money. People also prefer to marry off their daughters to urban dwellers ... the market rate being high especially for Government employees (for their assured income and side incomes).

When a son is settled in business in an urban area or gets a job, the dynamics of his farm change. The family has to shuttle between the urban area and the village. They would thus prefer to raise crops which require less supervision and monitoring such as mango, coconut and such horticulture crops. So, sometimes they leave a small patch for growing rice for home consumption and convert the rest of the lands – the food growing area under tanks into mango and coconut gardens. This trend although very much visible in almost every village is some how not being assessed by the agriculture department. In a similar trend in Kerala, large tracts of paddy growing areas have been converted into rubber and coconut plantations. The seven year drought from 1997-98 to 2004-05 drove many more to urban areas, never to return. The trend continues, although NREG has given some relief to the local labour.

Farmers lose both ways

If we go to sell, it is just “forest”, if we go to buy, it is “burning stick,” so goes a proverb in Telugu. When farmers show their crop for selling, the buyers would dismiss it as “forest” (not well tended), when they go to buy, the price is as hot as “burning stick.”

There are three kinds of costs in agriculture: cost of inputs, cost of operations and cost of marketing (transport, commissions, etc.). See Tables IA, IB, IC, and ID for cost of cultivation of four major crops: paddy, groundnut, sugarcane and tomato. In all the crops you will find farmers are incurring losses! Jaggery prices have been stagnant (Rs.6 to 7 per kg since the last 10 to 15 years, except for the election years! The same with paddy: prices have not crossed Rs.450 to 550 per bag of 75kgs, i.e. Rs. 6.6 per kg. On the other hand labour, diesel, fertilizer, pesticide costs have increased to almost double the levels in ten years. Because of this farmers are switching to high value crops, such as vegetables like tomato, brinjal, cotton, etc. But prices fluctuate so much that whatever gains one makes in one season is nullified in the next. Even if they earn profits for a few seasons continuously like the tomato farmer in Table ID, if you look at the broad picture you feel sad. There are 750 houses in Nellimanda village to which the tomato farmer Dhananjaya Naidu belongs. Together they have dug 900 borewells, each costing about Rs. 35,000 on an average, which means, Rs.3.5 crores! Of 900 borewells, 700 borewells have failed, which means a loss of Rs.2.45 crores! How can one continue in this kind of agriculture? Another person we know has been trying out growing aromatic crops, like lemon grass, etc. After a few years he gave up and is now growing seeds for vegetable crops for seed companies! A few others have been trying out tissue culture crops like banana, with similar uneven results in yields and incomes. Naturally farmers, even 5 acre farmers have been migrating to cities for eking out a livelihood, as small shop keepers, store keepers in construction companies, or whatever.

The economics of paddy, groundnut, sugarcane, and tomato is given in Tables IA, 1B, 1C, 1D. I urge the reader to have a look at them to understand the various operations and how the farmers are losing but valiantly sticking on because most of them have no other skills. Because of chronic losses and indebtedness farmers are fleeing from farming, migrating to towns and cities never to return. The youngsters are dissuaded from doing farming as a profession. If they are forced to do farming, they do so reluctantly and apologetically, and indifferently. If such a situation continues, coupled with large scale diversion of agricultural lands for non-agricultural purposes, agriculture production is bound to fall. Companies will take over and farmers will become destitute migrants in cities, unless there are massive employment opportunities for such massive numbers, which is very much in doubt, with technologies becoming more and more automated.

Table I A
Economics of cultivation: Paddy
Figures per acre in Rupees: Year 2007

Sl. No.	Item/ Operation	Farmer a 1 Muralidhara Naidu, VPuram	Farmer b 2 Jayarama Naidu VPuram	Farmer c 3 N.Ramu, sharecropper for author-organic	Farmer d 4 Chelikam Krishna Reddy, kalahasti
1	Type of Seed	BPT 5204 (locally known as Jilakara masoora)	BPT 5204 (locally known as Jilakara masoora)	ADB 37 locally known as Budda voddulu	Not known
2	Tractor ploughing	3300	2400	3300+600	1300
3	levelling	420	420	200	200
4	Bunds making	1150	400	400	400
5	Cost of seed	400	400	300	600
6	Nursery raising	500	500	500	500
7	Farmyard manure	0	3500	3000	0
8	Leaf manure	260	1000	700	0
9	transplanting	1430	1600	1430	1000
10	First weeding	450	500	450	400
11	Second weeding	0	400	0	400
12	Chemical fertilizer	750	500	Vermicompost 1200	1300
13	pesticides	310	640	Bio-pesticide 500	1500
14	harvesting	1000	750	600	500
15	Tying them into bundles and taking them to threshing floor	560	900	460	500
16	threshing	900	800	1000	500
17	Winnowing	150	150	150	150
18	Straw bundling	1000	1000	1000	1000
19	Watering	4500	4500	4500	4500
20	Jute bags(20)	400	600	400	600
Total expenditure		17480	20960	20690	15350
Income					
22	Straw	2000	2000	2000	1500
23	Yield	11000	15000	9000 to 13000	12900
24					
Total inc. (22+23)		13000	17000 to 17500	10600 to 15500	14400
25					
Net inc. (24-21)		-4480	-3960 to -3460	-10090 to -5190	-450 to -950

Table I B
Groundnut: 2007

Figures per acre in Rupees

S.No	Operation/item	Farmer A: Kharif-rainfed	Farmer B: Rabi-irrigated
1	Tractor Ploughing	900	600
2	Farm yard manure	2640	900
3	Seeds	1000	2100
4	Sowing	500	550
5	First weeding	500	1000
6	Second weeding	500	1000
7	Harvesting	400	1000
8	Plucking the nut from the plants	700	2100
9	Jute bags	200	600
10	Transport	200	200
11	Chemical fertilizer	nil	600
12	Pesticide	Nil	600
13	Watering	0	4500
14	Total expenditure	7540	15750
15	Yield	7000 to 10500	21000
16	Fodder	500	500
17	Total income (15+16)	7500 to 11000	21500
18	Net income	-40 to +3460	+5750

Table I C
Sugarcane: 2007

Figures per acre in Rupees

S.No	Item/operation	Farmer A	Farmer B
1	Tractor ploughing	2180	2325
2	Bunds making	240	0
3	Making furrows	320	800
4	Seed	6040	6040
5	Prepare seed	350	400
6	To cut the seeds	320	480
7	To put the seeds in the fields	400	370
8	Planting	960	560
9	First weeding	1000	700
10	Second weeding	750	0
11	Chemical fertilizer	2140	2860
12	Ploughing the furrows with bullocks	660	450
13	To prepare the beds	600	600
14	First binding	1500	1400
15	Second binding	1200	0
16	Third binding	400	600
17	Fourth binding	600	800
18	Watering	15000	15000
19	Farmyard manure	0	6480
20	Jaggery making	12500	10920
21	Rent of crusher	3600	4200
22	Total expenditure	50760	54985
23	Income from jaggery	36000	47250
24	Net income	-14760	-7735

Notes

If one owns the crusher, one saves on rent for crusher (Rs. 3600 - 4200); if one does watering himself, then one saves on labour (Rs. 15000); if one works to make jaggery then one can save 2 labor wages (Rs. 5000-5200). Total expenditure through above reduced to: 23600-24,400. If ratoon crop, then one saves on seed, planting (4,5,6,7,8), etc: 8070,7850; so profit from own labour and ratoon: 16890, 24515.

Farmer B took a loan for 24 to 36%, so he was not left with any profit.

Maharashtra banned our black jaggery which was going mostly for arrack, leading to a big fall in prices.

In making clean organic jaggery for direct consumption, filtering the cane juice and sieving the jaggery powder, etc. are additional costs. But since we were able to sell it directly to the consumers at retail price, we managed to make profits.

Table I D
Tomato: 2007
Figures per acre in Rupees

Sl. No.	Item/operation	Amount in Rupees
1	Tractor ploughing	1400
2	First Furrows making by bullocks	400
3	Farmyard manure purchase, transport and spraying in the fields	3200
4	Second Furrows and bund making	240
5	Seedlings purchase	3000 to 4500
6	Planting	220
7	First weeding	1200
8	Furrows weeding	600
9	Third furrows making	600
10	Support sticks from forest	1600
11	Soft reeds (of Ipomea fistulosa)	1000
12	Strings and ropes	2400
13	Planting the sticks	1000
14	Tying the sticks to the plants with strings	1600
15	Second tying	1200
16	Third tying	1200
17	Second weeding	600
18	Watering and watch	5000
19	Fertilizer	10,200
20	Pesticides	6690
21	Harvesting	7200
22	Total expenditure	50,550 to 52,050 (depending on cost of seed)
23	Net income after transport to market and commission	85,000 to 1,60,000 (depending on price and yield)

Notes

If weather is cool and dry yields would be good; in 2007 the weather was good; the seed Aditya gave good yields, price was high @Rs.10 per kilogram and therefore income was Rs.2,50,000 per acre. The farmer drilled 5 borewells @ an average cost of Rs.35, 000 per well; now only one is working with a 12 horse power motor. Tomato stands for 6 months; it should be followed up with paddy or groundnut to neutralize the “heat” of the fertilizers! This farmer grows 2 acres of tomato every year. In 2006 the price of tomato was between Rs.1 to 3 per kilogram; in 2005, it was between 5 and 6 rupees; in 2004, it was Rs.10 to 14; in 2003 it was Rs.4 to 4.50 per kg.

Growing brinjal is on similar lines. Expenditure would be from Rs. 20,000 to Rs. 30,000. At a price of Rs.4 per kg, for a yield of 40 tons, one can earn about Rs.1 lakh per acre.

Everybody in his village may not be as lucky as this farmer; there are 750 households in this village; together they drilled 900 borewells. Now only 200 borewells are working. During the seven year drought their numbers fell to just about 100. At an average cost of Rs. 35,000 per bore well (actually it costs much more, about Rs. 1, 00,000 per borewell, for digging, pipes, motors, pumps, electricity service connection, etc.; but often when a bore well fails, the same parts are used in another fresh borewell, that is how the expenditure is a little less), the cost of 900 borewells is Rs.3.15 crores. If out of these 700 borewells went dry, it means a loss of 2.45 crores!

Uma: *In our own case there were several reasons for our financial distress situation. As explained earlier, our costs were high; secondly, the during drought there was no income but operating expenses had to be incurred such as salaries and watering, fencing, etc. Thirdly, apart from agriculture we were also incurring heavy expenses on social work; fourth, bank interest rates on savings fell from almost 18% to 6%, and the UTI in which we had some money saved collapsed! Whatever money I was bringing through fellowships and consultancies was not sufficient. Our daughters were going for higher education and we needed money for their education. They had also been in the hostel for a long time and I thought they would soon fly away, I wanted to be with them. All this put together made me move to Hyderabad with the daughters in 2000. I am grateful to friends for helping us with jobs and consultancies which pulled us through this phase. Naren stayed on in the village to look after the agriculture and social work, especially on land reforms. Both of us traveled back and forth often enough, at least once a month.*

The National Farmers Welfare Commission

was appointed by the Government of India and Dr. M.S.Swaminathan was made the chairman of the same. They submitted their final report and recommendations in 2006. On the whole these recommendations were favorable to farmers, although it was silent on some critical issues. The more important recommendations are as follows:

1. There should be a fund for regulating and stabilizing prices of agricultural commodities. Whenever prices fall below the minimum support price (MSP)

the government should intervene and procure with this fund and regularize the prices.

2. A fair remunerative price is one which is 50% more than the cost of production so that the farmer has a small profit left after meeting the cost of production.
3. Land reforms should be implemented. Women should get a joint title with men.
4. Agricultural land should not be used for non-agricultural purpose.
5. Small farmers can be organized as a cooperative with about 1000 to 2000 acres, and they can profitably buy inputs and sell their produce.
6. Small farmers can do company farming making themselves as shareholders.
7. With the consent of farmers projects with commands of 25 lakh acres must be completed.
8. Pani panchayats should be created in every village to oversee water distribution and water bodies upkeep and rejuvenation
9. Traditional seeds should be preserved at the farmers' level.
10. Credit should be made easy. Interest for farmers should be fixed at 4%. In drought prone areas loans should be repaid in four to five years.
11. Crop insurance should be at the village level, and should cover from seed to selling the produce.

While these recommendations were welcome, the Commission was silent on the WTO and its impact on farmers. It was also silent on patent matters. It did not also take up genetically modified crop technology and terminator seeds technology. Organic farming was recommended only for certain areas like the North east and to be grown exclusively for export.

Till date the recommendations of Swaminathan Commission have not been implemented.

Around the same time the state government of AP appointed a Farmers Welfare Commission under Dr. Jayati Ghosh.

Its main recommendations are:

1. Tenant/ sharecropper farmers should be registered. The land owner should prove whether farmer is a tenant or not.
2. Land reforms should be implemented and women should be given titles.
3. In tribal (Agency) areas alienated land should be returned to Girijans.

4. Inequities in water resources development between regions and sections of farmers should be addressed. Old tanks and canals should be revived.
5. Credit should be available to farmers through cooperative societies, including for the tenants. Interest should never exceed the principal. Old loans should be rescheduled for payment in easy installments and new loans should be charged 6% interest.
6. Rainfed agriculture should be promoted with new technologies, attractive prices. Rainfed crops like millets and pulses should be distributed through Public Distribution Systems.
7. Private sector trade in inputs like seeds, pesticides, fertilizers should be closely monitored and regulated. They should be made available cheaply. High Yielding Varieties (HYVs) should be created in public sector labs instead of hybrids by private industry.
8. Organic fertilizers should be encouraged instead of chemical fertilizers.
9. A separate fund should be created to stabilize prices. When prices fall this fund should be used to procure and distribute the commodities in question. Imports and exports should be regulated to keep the prices stable.
10. Monoculture should be discouraged and a multi-crop system should be encouraged; Value addition industries and agriculture-allied activities like dairying, oil presses should be encouraged.

The Government of Andhra Pradesh while accepting the recommendations, glossed over and put aside some critical recommendations like procurement when prices fall, register for tenants and land reforms.

This is the context in which enters the NREG!

National Rural Employment Guarantee program (NREG)

Uma: NREG scheme was formulated (only after much resistance) by the Government of India as a measure to stop rural folk from migration to cities. It has been a reasonable success in Andhra Pradesh in spite of the usual corruption. It has raised the wages of daily wage workers to about Rs. 100 to 150 per day not only in NREG works but also in private farm operations. Small farmers have benefited from it by using it for land development. In Chittoor district thousands of farmers planted mangoes in their rainfed lands as rainfed farming became more and more uneconomical and difficult to operate and organize. Many public assets have been created/ repaired such as tank bunds, tank beds, etc.

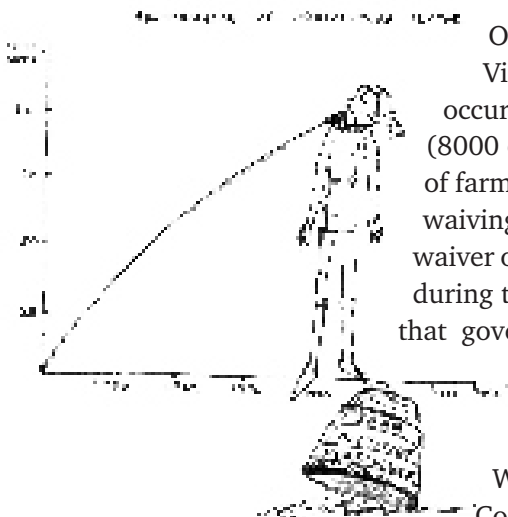
The flip side (apart from the usual corruption) has been that it has made farmers' lives even more difficult. Farmers are often not able to afford such a high wage rate when their own fortunes (crop yields and prices) are so very uncertain. In NREG works they work for hardly 3 to 4 hours but claim wage for 6 to 8 hours. They have got so used to this that they are reluctant to work for farmers under the latter's close supervision for full six to eight hours. In addition the state government has launched a major housing scheme and many workers, including women, prefer to go for construction work. With regular cash flow in agricultural workers' hands drinking has become common. In fact in addition to regular wages in cash, they are nowadays demanding both food and liquor as part of daily wage payments! Farmers are getting desperate, because, with the breakdown of joint families there is hardly any family labour available. They prefer to keep their lands fallow or switch to horticulture crops like mango, as described above. Unless farmers' incomes are assured, agricultural production is bound to fall, which will create a grave situation of food insecurity in the country. The success of NREG is good but it should be complemented with the right policies for the farmers.

Naren always felt that along with NREG, land distribution should have been done, for land is a productive asset for agricultural workers. Increase in wages has no end, it raises the cost of cultivation, and will inevitably raise the consumer prices; whereas land distribution would put a productive asset in the hands of the agricultural workers from which they can derive an income. Land distribution seems to be nobody's agenda. But more of that later.

WTO: Why farmers of every country are dissatisfied with it?

WTO agreement has made exports and imports free of restrictions. Production without subsidies is the goal. Sounds good. But what is the reality? The Doha round of discussions on agriculture has been failing ever since WTO came into being. Alarmed at the falling incomes, indebtedness leading to large scale farmers suicides and protests, the Developing countries have been opposing the game of Developed countries which continue to give fat subsidies to farmers and keep the price low both within and outside their countries, even as they are pressurizing Developing countries to give up the meager subsidies given in these countries and to allow exports from Developed countries. In spite of opposition, exports and imports have become easier, and that is how one sees Australian apples and other American melons, chocolates, and stuffs in super markets. Imports of sugar, cotton, edible oil, and wheat have lowered the prices for our farmers, pushing them into poverty further. Exports of essential food stuffs have meant that at times we have had to import wheat at higher prices than we were prepared to give our farmers! Again the latest bad news is that international prices of food have skyrocketed because all over the world the same WTO in combination with LPG policies, have meant farmers are giving up growing food crops because of losses and are taking to non-food crops or non-agricultural occupations. How to keep farmers

in farming, how to prevent fall in agricultural/food production has become the global challenge today. In our country also there is no room for complacency.



Our Prime Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh went to Vidarbha when a spate of suicides by cotton farmers occurred there and announced a package of Rs. 80 billion (8000 crores). But it did not feature two important demands of farmers: it was silent on remunerative price for cotton and waiving of bank loans. The same PM announced a massive waiver of loans amounting to Rs.60,000 crores after two years, during the election year for the whole country! It is very clear that government(s) in India is not having any intention of intervening in prices in spite of the fact that it is the main recommendation of government appointed high profile National Commission on Farmers Welfare, popularly called M.S.Swaminathan Commission. In the meantime farmers, unable to bear the losses, are fleeing from agriculture. Farmers' suicides are continuing, and agricultural production is falling threatening food security of not less than 1.6 billion people. This is the subject of our next section.

Displacement of farmers from their lands, forced and voluntary

The historical concomitant of “development” has been the displacement of large populations from farming to other sectors, even as other sectors develop, such as mining, industries, transport, communications, banking, education, health, etc. This process is both voluntary and forced – wages and incomes in other sectors are more attractive; land is acquired by the state for non-agricultural sectors. Even in voluntary give-up of farming there is often coercion. Farming sector is either made unviable due to fragmentation of land holdings, or due to state policy of keeping agricultural prices low. As this process goes on, villages are emptied out and towns become congested. In the scenario of high growth, it is estimated that another 40 crores of people will come out of agriculture and migrate to urban areas in the next few years. Developmentalists argue that adequate compensation either in money or land for land will solve the problem. Our experience has been otherwise. Displaced people go through unspeakable hardships in trying to start and succeed in a new life and livelihood. And even very considerate and generous rehabilitation packages can not neutralize the trauma and the hardship.

Uma: *I accompanied Naren once in his Srisailam trips. At the end of our discussion with a group of farmers, in which they described their hardships, we asked what they would want*

the government to do. One of them said, “ask the government to dispatch some poison for each of us, that would do.”

Displacement is going to be the major problem in the near future. The Industries Minister of West Bengal government remarked land acquisition is inevitable, for after all we can't build factories in skies, can we? True, if we want industries we need land and farmers will have to face displacement. But it is here that we have to be doubly careful. Till now industrial development has been an unquestioned holy cow of development. Historically land was not a problem in the developed countries, and for natural resources they had colonies, they could bring cheap forced labour from other countries. But with colonies disappearing, with people protesting against polluting industries in both developed and developing countries, with land availability shrinking with increased populations, with demand for food increasing with population increase and therefore good agricultural land becoming scarce,

It is time to ask:

- is the particular industry necessary, what will it produce, how and for whom is the product useful?
- ? will it pollute land, water and air of the surrounding areas so much that neither people nor other life forms can survive without their health getting affected?
- ? if agricultural lands are given away for industry, how will it impact food production locally and nationally?
- ? how to ensure alternative employment and livelihood and adequate incomes for the displaced farmers?
- ? who will take the decisions regarding the siting of industries, the operations involved in the industry?
- ? if displacement is inevitable, how to ensure smooth, humane compensation –rehabilitation package for the displaced people?

All these and more questions have to be asked. We hope Nandigram, Singur and Bastar struggles will act as prod to decision makers to ask these questions. Perhaps recession will bring some sense? Climate change becoming a reality, will it make them ask such questions? But as yet there is no sign of our governments asking them, they are still “high” on high growth rates. National rehabilitation bill is under negotiation. Protesting people facing displacement are proposing their own version of it, government is taking its own sweet time over it, even as land acquisition is happening on a very large scale in the country.

Handri Neera

Uma: Naren had been concerned with displacement since the last twenty five years, ever since 1982, his Srisailam days. At last displacement came knocking at our doors too. As

part of Jala Yagnam, the Handri-Neeva project has been formulated. One day in March 2008 (Naren and I were visiting the village during his treatment for brain cancer in Hyderabad) some farmers of our village came with a gentleman saying, "Please speak to this man; he is saying something we can not understand." The gentleman introduced himself as a sub-contractor of the Handri-Neeva project, and said that he has taken the contract for digging a small portion of the canal in our area in two weeks, and that he wants the farmers to give him a place to park his earth mover machines and workers. He wanted to start the work from the next day!

We were truly surprised; this was real fast track development – in land acquisition and displacement! The people had not even been informed by the government that such a project existed, that the canal would be going through our village; that lands would be acquired; and here was the contractor who wanted to complete the work in two weeks! Naren explained the land acquisition procedure to both the contractor and the farmers and politely asked the contractor to go away. When the contractor insisted that he would "simply park his machines," the farmers issued a veiled threat to him, "you may park it, but we can not guarantee the safety of your machinery." At that the contractor did go away.

This started a series of actions. Several meetings were held with the farmers to be displaced. Naren asked them to prepare an estimate of the value of their losses – land, trees, structures, tools like borewells and pipes – and asked them not to allow the work to be started till they receive the compensation cheques. He organized a district level public meeting of farmers to be displaced by the Handri-Neeva project, addressed by the leaders of all opposition political parties, took out a procession to the office of the special officer in charge of land acquisition for the project, registered a case in the High Court and got a decree that the government should follow all the due revenue procedures. He got the Human Rights Forum to write a pamphlet in Telugu titled, "When the government comes to acquire your land..." and distributed it widely. The farmers in our village by and large resisted successfully the moves to hasten the project by contractors by not allowing their machinery to come in. The revenue process was initiated by a visit to the village by the Joint Collector; the farmers were able to negotiate the amount of compensation to some extent. Today the canal has been dug; the farmers have a written commitment from the government on the amount of compensation, and are waiting for their compensation cheques.

This was the last struggle led by Naren.

Water is life: Rains, Tanks, and Our Power struggles

Indian farmers looking at the skies for rains are not just images in photographs and films; they indeed are a ground reality, a fact of life. Timely, adequate and regular rains at different stages of growth and fruition of the crops make all the difference – a single spell at times could be the difference between prosperity and desperation. The dry land farmer

knows this better and more bitterly than anybody else. This is the reason why farmers, wherever they may be, are desperate to get an assured water supply for their lands.

Uma: I used to find it amusing that Naren's father, when we were in Hyderabad, would now and then make a trunk call to the village and the first question he would ask was whether there was any rain! Now I myself ask the same question!

In upland areas, where there is little scope for river water through dams and canals, man-made reservoirs called “tanks” by the British, supplemented by wells, have been the backbone of irrigation i.e. assured water supply to crops. In Andhra Pradesh the traditional rulers over the centuries have constructed over 80,000 tanks some of them irrigating thousands of acres. In Chittoor district there are about 8,000 tanks today, mostly built during the rule of the Vijayanagara kings. Due to the hilly terrain most of them are chains of tanks with the surplus of one tank flowing into the one below and they are generally small in size irrigating between 30 to 100 acres. These tanks were often built and maintained by the *ayacutdars* themselves, or by kings, chiefs and noble men, who were encouraged to do so by the rulers offering tax concessions for several years. It was also thought of as an act of merit, deriving *punyam* for those constructing the tanks.

An elaborate system of rules of maintenance and sharing of water was evolved – a part of the land and / or produce was set apart separately for the maintenance of the tank, all the *ayacutdars* (farmers having land in the command area) at the beginning of the rainy season had to collectively clear the supply and feeder channels of weeds, etc. There was always a headman (“*Pinapedda*”) who was usually the one who owned most land under the tank. It was he who would give specific instructions for the actual activities to the *Neerugatti*, who was invariably a Scheduled Caste person.

The *Neerugatti*, or water – irrigator was the critical person in the whole structure. It was he who irrigated all the fields, called the farmers for work, and repaired, especially at times of rains, when the bund gave way, etc. When the water is less in the tank, he would intimate the *ayacutdars*. All the *ayacutdars* assembled and decided what crops to grow, etc. It was the job of the *Neerugatti* to see that the tank water was distributed equally between those who were tail-enders and those who had lands just below the bund. The *Neerugatti* family was maintained by all the *ayacutdars*. He was entitled to a share of the produce and was also to be fed by the *ayacutdars* when irrigating their fields. There were many tax concessions for the *ayacutdars* and much of the tax collected from the tank irrigated lands often went back to the village for maintenance of the temple, tank, village functionaries, etc. The king / ruler was supposed to collect a sixth of the produce, but this was increased to one-fourth during medieval times and to almost half during British rule.

As the tanks were declared to be government property, the government took away a major share of the produce. The *ayacutdars* were left with little surplus or motivation to maintain the tanks. This led to gross neglect of tanks and fall in revenues. And lands

were even left fallow at times. The British set up various committees and realized their mistakes. But they were not willing to part with their overall claim to the ownership of the tank and share in the produce as taxes, although they reduced them a little. They took up maintenance of the tanks and found it to be a costly affair. They abandoned the smaller tanks and concentrated only on the bigger ones (above 100 acres command area). So the decline of tanks began during the British rule although the tanks were the heart of irrigation in these dry regions. People did try to maintain them as best as they could under the circumstances, as there was no other means of irrigation except wells, which often supplemented the tanks during the rabi season. As the maintenance of tanks declined, well irrigation increased.

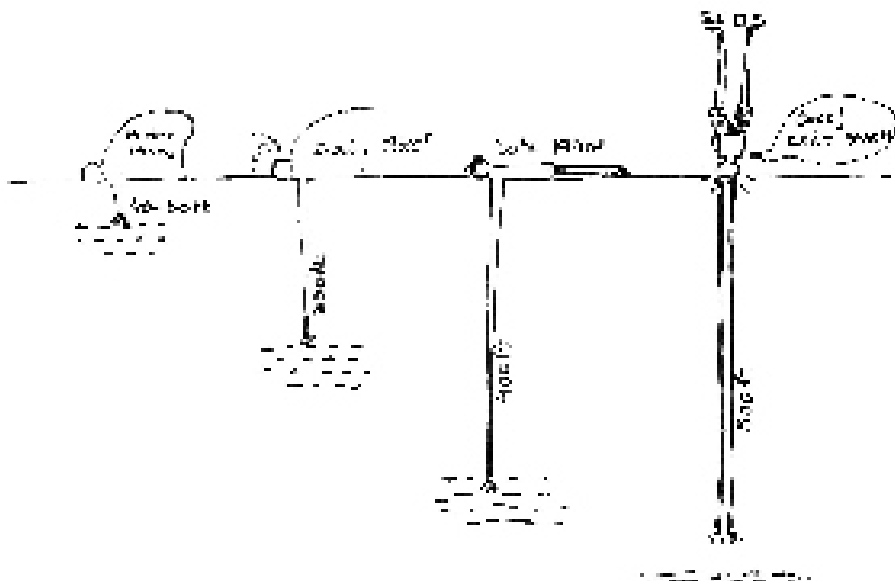
***Uma:** The first thing I did after going to the village is to undertake a survey of tanks in the district. (Uma Shankari 1991). We started an effort called Neeti Samakhya (Water Collective) and tried to propagate the idea of tank restoration. The main problems twenty years ago were lack of government budget for regular maintenance, neglect of feeder channels, so that water went away here and there instead of flowing into the tanks, indiscipline in water distribution, mainly not closing the sluices for storing water in the tank, so that whatever water flowed in got emptied out within a few days. Early on we did a lot of work on tank restoration in our own village. Subsequently under Chandra Babu Naidu's regime in the Nineties tank restoration became a component of a major government program called Neeru-Meeru and our panchayat took full advantage of it. It continues under the NREG, and today most tanks in the district have been deepened and feeder channels have been cleared of vegetation. Hundreds of check dams and percolation tanks have also been constructed. But the old system has changed beyond recognition; the Neerugattis are no more important, their functions having been taken over by the farmers themselves in most of the tanks. The farmers are not growing only paddy, they are growing different crops – paddy, ground nut, ragi, sugarcane, vegetables, – in the tank commands, their watering schedules are varying, and they feel they do not need the services of the Neerugatti any more. The sluices of several tanks are also closed, the tanks serving percolation purposes than irrigation.*

Borewell technology and the electricity tangle

The advent of Independence saw no perceptible change in the attitude of the authorities. The government was still considered the owner of the tank system (and other common property resources) and therefore the onus was on the government to repair and maintain or not. This was more so with the bigger tanks. Introduction of diesel engines in the early sixties meant that more water could be pumped out with less physical effort. The problem was further accentuated with the introduction of electric irrigation pumpsets and supply of cheap subsidized electric power during the 70s and 80s. With the earlier bullock drawn moats, recharge of the wells kept pace with the

water drawn out. But with the diesel and the cheaper electric motors, the water table in the wells was depleted faster than their capacity to recharge. This necessitated deepening of wells and use of rigs to blast the rocks. But very soon the water table went beyond the reach of the rigs and the farmers were forced to go for in-well bores. If one struck good water in the bore inside one's well, it only meant that the neighbour's well would go dry and he would have to bore deeper. This kind of one upmanship has meant that water table which was around 40 to 50 feet went down to 200 feet by the early 1980s. Today it has gone down to 500 ft! Soon in-well bores of 4½ inches gave way to 6½ inches – surface borewells now going up to 500 feet and beyond, necessitating use of more powerful motors 7.5 to 10 horsepower and pumpsets of 7 to 12 stages to suck the water from deep down – implying greater use of electric energy.

The current scenario is that all landholders below a tank who were earlier irrigating their fields with tank water (supplemented by wells towards the end of the season) now irrigate the same lands with deep bore wells pumping water from 200 to 500 feet and more below the surface. In this process many bore wells have gone dry and water has not been struck in new places. The lucky few also survive for an average period of five years. Those bore wells under tanks would get recharged when there is water in the tank. But those in the open are left to the mercy of the “Patal Ganga,” (the river Ganges in the Nether World) Or till someone else strikes a bore well in the same underground path.



On an average, a farmer would have spent Rs.1, 00,000 per well. (This is a modest estimate taking into consideration the cost of digging an open well, lining with stones, going in for electric motor, then deepening the well, blasting with rigs and sinking a bore well, installing a compressor or more powerful electric pumpset and then abandoning

the whole thing and going in for a fresh surface borewell, which may or may not strike water.) For the 2.4 million (24 lakh) officially recognized services in the State for electric powered well connections, the farmers would have spent, at an average Rs.1 lakh per service – something like Rs.24,000 crores! Very little of it has come from the banks or other state agencies. As surveys among the suicide committing cotton farmers revealed, most of the credit (80 to 90%) availed of by farmers came from private sources at heavy interest. But the farmer still prefers to go in for bore-wells at such huge expenditure and risk because it makes eminent sense to him. If a farmer were to spend Rs.50,000 sinking a bore well and fixing a motor, and were to irrigate one acre of land with the water (the average per bore well is about 2 acres in this area) by planting sugarcane he would be able to more or less clear his loan within two or three years. However, he does not want to recognize that in the next two or three years the bore well would go dry or flow deplete forcing him to go in for another bore well, much deeper this time! He keeps hoping his individual luck would be better and his borewell would serve him longer!)

With the advent of bore well technology, the Pandora's Box has been opened, with each-one-for-himself and the-devil-take-care-of-the-rest attitude. Sinking of bore wells is not confined to lands under the tanks but to dry lands which are being converted into mango gardens on a large scale (something akin to the orange gardens of Maharashtra). The individual oriented bore-well technology has further aggravated the problem of neglect of tanks and gradually, those having lands adjacent to the tank bed have started encroaching on to them, often sinking bore wells right in the tank bed and occupying large parts of the tank bed. Almost every other year the revenue authorities announce "last warnings" and at times even destroy some standing sugarcane crop, but the process continues. At times these encroachers even divert the water from entering the tanks. Being locally powerful, there aren't many who dare oppose them and incur their wrath.

Today, in most villages of Chittoor district there is no question of even drinking water if there is no electric supply. Thanks to the way the bore well technology has been used or allowed to be used today, the farmers in Chittoor district are completely dependent upon electric supply for their water needs. This is more or less the case in all the upland areas of the state as well as the country.

The farmers are finding the going difficult with the present prices of agriculture produce. Besides, with the floodgates of imports being opened under WTO conditionalities and the prices of various agricultural commodities crashing and subject to the whimsical nature of the international market, the situation is only likely to get worse. With unremunerative prices for practically all agricultural products, the prospects are indeed bleak for farmers of our country.

It is in this context that the farmers felt highly resistant to withdrawal of any subsidy – of power or of fertilizer. In 1995 Chandrababu Naidu came to power after bringing down

the government of N.T. Rama Rao. In six months Loksabha elections were declared. He promised rice at Rs. 2 per kilogram and power at Rs. 50 per horsepower and prohibition (of liquor). He did well in the elections and became the Chief minister. But within six months he went back on all his promises.

The Electricity Board of Andhra Pradesh released a white paper. In that it was stated that farmers were paying only 3 paise per unit whereas state was spending Rs. 2 per unit for agriculture. Their consumption has increased to 45% of power utilized. On the other hand industrial consumption has gone down from 48% to 28%, so there was no other option except to increase power tariffs for agriculture. It was increased eight to ten times – that is 800 to 1000% at one go! The farmers were really surprised, after all did not the Chief Minister know all this just six months ago? We had no clue about electricity matters but we decided this was unjust and resolved not to pay the charges till the government rolled back the hike in tariffs. We formed a group called Rashtriya Raithu Seva Samithi and started studying electricity matters. In the meantime the new Electricity Act was brought in, in spite of boycott by the opposition. It appointed Andhra Pradesh Electricity Regulatory Commission (APERC). The APERC conducted public hearings on power sector matters. With the help of a retired engineer of Electricity Department we made our own calculations. If we use a 5 hp motor for 6 hours per day for 200 days a year (which is what farmers do on an average) the power consumption did not come to even half of what the government was claiming. So we argued with the APERC that since power consumption in agriculture was not metered, the government, not being able to curtail the thefts, was showing thefts as agriculture consumption. While APERC appreciated our presentation, it actually ordered for further increase in tariffs by another 60%! With this farmers in the whole state became agitated and started wide spread protests.

In Tirupati we started a Committee with all the farmers' organizations to protest against the increase in power tariffs. We undertook a tour of the district and spoke in public meetings to farmers about how we were being made scapegoats for their inability to curtail power thefts. We asked the farmers not to pay such unjust power tariffs till government rolled back the increase. But to our surprise we found that Chittoor district while being the second in number of wells, was the fifth in power arrears, whereas the Telengana farmers were before us in arrears. That is, we were declaring about not paying, whereas the Telengana farmers were silently not paying!

With the help of People's Monitoring Group on Power Sector Reforms (PMG) I learnt about the problems in the sector further – how private sector is being promoted at the cost of public sector, how we were paying Rs. 400 to 600 crores to private sector unnecessarily, how government had given permission for gas based plants without assurance of gas. We participated every year in public hearings on accounts submitted by DISCOMS (Distribution Companies) and TRANSCO (Transmission Company). We

also conducted trainings for farmers on electricity matters. In due course Rashtriya Raithu Seva Samithi was asked to be a member of the Advisory Council of APERC on behalf of farmers. I was asked by the President Shri Rajendra Reddy to participate in their deliberations. I raised many thorny issues in the Council. After two years I was dropped from the Council without even being informed!

The farmers were repeatedly pleading that the upland farms have invested Rs. 1,00,000 per well, over Rs. 24,000 crores in well irrigation in the last two decades for 24 lakh services; and the government, having failed to provide canal water, should either collect water user charges at the same rate as for the canal water users – a nominal Rs.400 per acre per annum – or give them the first right of use over the power produced by the damming of rivers viz. hydel power at cost of generation, which is not more than 20 paise per unit. The whole quantity of around 9000 MU would be adequate to take care of agricultural requirements in our state. The demand was that it was the moral duty of the state to supply water to the farmers of the upland areas especially since they have invested such huge amounts – and the state has benefited from the increase in the value of produce. Records show that between 1982-83 and 1996-97 area irrigated under tanks has gone down by about 50%; under canals, surprisingly, it was down by 15%. But under well irrigation, including bore wells, the area went up by 40% covering 42% of the total irrigated area (up from 20% in 1982-'83). Thus bulk of agriculture production is coming from the well irrigation, and farmers have borne the fixed costs of the same. Why should the government not give concessional power?

In the meantime elections came again, and although we only demanded roll back of tariffs, Y. S. Rajasekhar Reddy, the opposition leader promised free power for agriculture and won the elections on that slogan. And we also thought if someone wants to give, why not support him. Today we are enjoying the so called free power; actually they are charging a minimal amount of Rs. 120 per connection per year as fixed charges and giving us only 7 hours of power per day as against 9 hours during Chandrababu Naidu regime. Power breakdowns are very common, mainly because of overload, illegal drawing of power, and so on.

The DISCOMs keep on arguing endlessly that unless every well is individually metered we can not know exactly how much is consumed by the agriculturists. They say every year it is increasing. We have been saying it may not be wise to spend crores of rupees on metres for individual wells. The meters will be tampered with, leading to corruption and bribes, and it would be difficult to protect against rain and other weather conditions, and thefts. It may be a better idea to install meters in the transformers, organize the farmers into consumer clubs under each transformer, fix the load under each transformer, and if any one uses more power illegally, the motors will burn out and the farmers will be collectively responsible for it, who in turn will punish the erring farmer! This kind of measures will have to be undertaken in a campaign mode, we argued. But

neither the politicians nor bureaucracy wants to act on this because both are corrupt and they can continue to push the thefts under agricultural consumption! The basic problem is that there is no accountability.

Uma: *When we shifted to the village we found that nobody had installed any meter in their homes except our family! Everyone was using power, mainly for bulbs and fans, but soon also for electric stoves, TV and even to heat water for bathing, drawn directly with wires hooked to the power lines, a practice which was theft, pure and simple, and dangerous too. Agriculture power was not metered but one had to pay a fixed charge of Rs. 50 per horsepower, which was rarely collected by the electricity department! When Chandrababu Naidu government came to power it not only raised the tariffs on agriculture to some unreasonable levels but also tried to install meters for domestic consumption of electricity on a campaign mode. Surprisingly people did not object to installing of meters for domestic consumption; in fact they cooperated. But power for agriculture was a different matter; it was a matter of livelihood. Had the government simply collected the scheduled tariff of Rs.50 per hp, or had it even doubled the power tariffs, people would have thought it reasonable. But the tariffs were raised in one go by six to twelve times and the electricity department was instructed to collect them too! This was the time the whole state was facing a drought and farmers were not even running their pumps! Their incomes were at an all time low and the burden was felt to be too much. We refused to pay the hiked power tariffs on principle. The electricity department personnel came often to collect, and sometimes forced some farmers to pay, but we politely told them that we are not against them, that we are not paying because we are protesting. Often they were in sympathy with us, being themselves owning a few acres of land. They would request us to pay some small amount so that they can show it in their records, so that they would not lose their jobs. In sympathy we paid a small amount and sent them away. Later on we realized even the Telugu Desam party members were not paying!*

Now of course the situation is different. Lines for agriculture have been separated from lines for domestic consumption. More transformers have been installed. A service charge of Rs. 120 per pumpset is being collected for agriculture power; meters have been installed in homes and people do pay power charges quite promptly.

Free power does not solve the ground water problem. Farming does not need power, it needs water. Ground water is being used because surface water resources like tanks are mismanaged. Chandra Babu Naidu regime did try to address this through schemes like Neeru-Meeru (Water and You), and watershed development. The problem needs a multipronged approach. One man in one village created wonders in Maharashtra (Anna Hazare in Ralengaon Siddhe) and one organization in deserted Rajasthan brought back a dead river to life reconstructing the tanks (Rajender Singh and the Tarun Bharat Sangh).

Our suggestions are:

1. Under each transformer all the services should be regularized to the estimate the actual load.
2. Every transformer should be metered.
3. Power conservation measures like installing capacitors, plastic pipes, foot-valves should be installed by individual farmers and government should undertake these measures in a campaign mode.
4. Under every transformer a consumer club should be created. Incentives for power conservation and penalties for overload should be formulated and implemented.
5. Indiscriminate borewell digging should be stopped.
6. Two or three farmers can share a bore well. Such schemes should be encouraged with incentives.
7. Drip irrigation should be encouraged.
8. Crops and methods which need less water like SRI paddy should be given encouragement with the right incentives.
9. Watershed schemes and tank restoration schemes should be implemented with seriousness.
10. Afforestation and watershed development measures through VSS and NREG schemes.
11. Sand mining should be punished severely.

The Emperor's Clothes –

Watersheds/ Joint Forest Management through Vana Samrakshana Samithi – VSS (“Forest Protection Councils”)

It is such success stories like that of Tarun Bharat Sangh and Ralegaon Siddhi which give us hope that all is not lost. It appears to have inspired our dynamic Chief Minister Chandra Babu Naidu to adopt the same for Andhra Pradesh with World Bank aid. Under the watershed management programme over 5000 watersheds were to be developed within a span of 4 years, each of them being allocated Rs. 20 lakhs. We all know what happens when a lot of money is poured into a project. The smell of money (like blood) attracted the local sharks in the form of petty politicians of the ruling party, local heavy weights who cornered several of the watershed projects each (3 or 4). Forget water – milk and honey flowed in their homes within a brief span of about 3-4 years. Not to be

outdone, some of the NGOs also jumped into the race and most of them now have a handful of watersheds each, some handed down after being messed up by the local bigwigs or the Government (so, now they have an excuse). Even those NGOs who were earlier involved in organizing the dalits especially on issues of land, have now veered around to watershed development and Joint Forest Management (*Vana Samrakshana Samithis*).

However, the entire exercise has been reduced to a farce and the people are left with a fat bill in the form of a foreign loan! The basic idea of watershed was never properly explained and measures of getting the people involved took a back seat. The projects were time bound and the money had to be finished. Those monitoring the show assessed that at least 10% of the watersheds were reasonably successful, in the sense that the actual works were completed and there was some involvement of the local people and one could see the water table in the area rising. These will be the show pieces for the evaluators, the lenders and the media to be taken around. Similar is the case with the JFM, later named CFM (Community Forest Management) projects.

***Uma:** Nagesh has been involved in creating and running a VSS in our panchayat for several years now. It is a long story in itself, but thanks to the commitment of Nagesh and Krishna Murthy, it has emerged as a model VSS in the district. The forest in the VSS area looks much better than the forests in the non-VSS area. However, in spite of our best efforts the importance of forests has not sunk in the consciousness of the people of the village.*

The VSS in our panchayat was allotted about 500 acres of Reserve Forest in which 40 acres were cleared for a “research plantation” initiated by the Forest Department. New clonal saplings of amla, neem, jamun, custard apple were planted with the promise that they will start yielding in about five years and the VSS will get an income from them through which it can maintain itself. The custody of the trees was to be distributed among willing VSS members, especially from the scheduled tribes (ST) and scheduled castes (SC), and they were supposed to look after them, especially watering, for about five years after which the trees would start yielding and they would get an income from them. The expected trade-off for the Forest Department was that the five hundred acres of the Reserve Forest adjoining the plantation would be protected from grazing, stealing, etc.

But things happened otherwise. The project started late as usual and funding was there only for three and a half years. The STs and the SCs did not want the trees, the VSS was too far for them to take an active interest on a day-to-day basis, they were not sure what will happen after five years- they were not sure who will own the trees, whether they will yield well, what will be the market for them, what would be the price, etc. Had the trees been mango they would have known all these and would have been confident. They were interested only in employment the VSS gave them and the wages. It was important for them in the sense that in the peak of drought years it provided continuous employment for a number of families.

Nagesh tried to involve the farmers and the panchayat. They responded by giving a lot of goodwill and respect, but were too busy in their own affairs to bother with the running of the VSS. Not cowed down by such setbacks, Nagesh and Krishna Murthy continued their efforts, erected many water conservation structures, drilled three bore wells, got the electricity connection, planned the day to day operations, raised money from other organizations when the government funding of the VSS ended after three and a half years and so on. But the cloned trees have not borne the expected yields although they have shown very good growth. There has been no income, and the Forest Department does not know why! Nagesh says the Forest department tracks only those projects which they are funding. Once the funding stops, they can not do anything about it. The neighboring farmers continue to graze their livestock in spite of repeated warnings. We were, however, able to stop sand mining after much persuasion. But "now" Nagesh has moved to Chennai and the VSS operations are going on at a minimal scale.

Though watershed development is an important component of the exercise in moisture conservation, including revitalization of tanks (there was this strange argument by some government officials that tank revitalization was not part of water shed management as the same was not mentioned in the programme! The issue was later clarified), several other steps also need to be taken.

The farmer's keenness to grow water intensive crops like sugarcane and paddy has to be traced to reasonable returns and assured income that they tend to provide. So we have to try and evolve combinations of cropping patterns which require less water and give reasonably attractive returns, low or medium level of risk and effort. Turning to horticulture or growing of forest related medicinal plants like *amla* are a few options. The neglect of dry land crops such as *ragi*, *bajra* etc. have had a telling affect both on the nutrition level of people in the area and tendency to convert to water intensive crops. If the prices of these crops were higher, they may return to these crops. In the mean time, peoples' eating habits have also undergone a sea change. They no longer consume these dry crops (*sajja*, *korra*, *jonna*) having converted to subsidized ration rice with a little smattering of ragi powder thrown in, if at all. Eating rice is considered socially superior to eating *ragi* or *jowar*. We have been eating unpolished rice for the last 12 years but have not been able to persuade our neighbours and fellow farmers and workers to do so. Earlier they also used to eat only boiled rice, now that is used only for making *idlies*. We have been demanding that millets should be included as part of the public distribution system (PDS) but government has been reluctant to expand the scope of the PDS; in fact it is trying very hard to make it into "targeted PDS," excluding many. The reason cited is high transaction costs of procurement and distribution. However, since the price of pulses have shot up to unaffordable levels, the Congress government included one kilogram of pigeon pea (*tuvar dal*), the most commonly consumed pulse, in PDS. We also hear that a pilot project has been launched in Anantapur district to include millets in PDS, and farmers have been advised to grow them – at long last!

As stated earlier, the basic motivating factor for the farmer, like any one else, is relatively easy money. Any crop or practice will be adopted, even if it means not too much effort and not too much risk, provided the returns are sufficiently attractive. (Tomato has become one such crop in the western taluks and generally sugarcane in wet areas at other places. Till recently silk production was also quickly adopted by the farmers. The import of superior quality Chinese silk at lower prices has been adversely affecting silk production of late).

Planners will have to make their programmes attractive for the farmers – adequate to motivate them. A kisan credit card is such a scheme wherein the farmer is not tied down to a particular activity for availing the loan, allowing him some freedom of expenditure. A recent success story has been the thrift scheme for women popularly known as Development of Women and Children in Rural Areas (DWCRA) under which groups of 10 to 15 women get together and save Rs.30/- a month (a rupee a day) and deposit the money every month for 6 months at the nearest bank in a joint account. After six months of such saving the bank (government) sanctions each of the members a loan of Rs.1, 000 each. The cycle is repeated a second time and then they are ready for a bigger loan of Rs.15 to 20,000 for dairying etc. The scheme does not insist on the loan amount in the first two stages to be spent only on productive purposes and allows for consumption purposes as well. But after the first two rounds, the saving habit is ingrained and the women usually buy productive assets by the third round. The repayment rate has been as high as 90% unlike the earlier schemes (50 to 60%). There are now more than 3,50,000 such groups across the state with their savings in each village ranging from 25,000 to more than a lakh and the total amount in the state running to several hundreds of crores. The individual groups are federated into pyramidal structure at the village, mandal and district levels. Regular meetings, trainings, monitoring, marketing supports, have made the DWCRA a huge success. Can we build a movement of farmers in the same model?

From the above discussion it is clear that even 10 acres of land without water (as happens in Anantapur and Mahboobnagar districts, dependent on rains, and usually growing groundnut or jowar, dependent upon the highly unpredictable rainfall pattern) is not equivalent to one acre of wet land – land with an assured supply of water. An average income would be around Rs. 10,000 to Rs. 20,000 per acre for wet land and Rs. 1000 to 2,500 for dry lands depending upon the crop and rain.

From our own calculations, if we cost rent for land, interest on bore well sunk, risk factor, management expenses and farmers' own labour, etc, all these would imply a net loss for all the crops. But the farmer calculates only what he actually spends by way of cash and that way there is an apparent profit. Excluding rent on land cost of sinking a well and management charges the farmer gets some "profit" and the show goes on!

For the various schemes of water and power conservation (to make farming less dependent on external forces and more sustainable) of the NGOs or the Government or of political parties, how does one get the local people to co-operate? In all the schemes about watershed management or VSS or tank restoration this key element is being left unanswered. The same goes for the price crisis being faced by the farmers. Although farmers are frustrated and angry at the crash in prices and are partly aware of the real culprit – wrong agriculture policies, WTO conditionalities and India's unpreparedness, there is a kind of despondency – perhaps a result of repeated desertion by the leaders of the farmers' movements into electoral politics.

This then is the challenge, how to mobilize the farmers to fight for their rights and to work together for their survival?

Jalayagnam

When YS Rajasekhara Reddy (YSR) was not in power he examined many schemes and proposals to get the state of Andhra Pradesh, particularly the Rayalseema region out of the drought situation. In 2004 he undertook a padayatra of 1500 kilometres through the state to understand the farmers' problems. He came to the conclusion that water is the critical factor for farmers and agriculture and declared the Jalayagnam scheme. According to this not less than 36 incomplete/ pending projects were to be completed within five years, with an irrigation potential of 65 lakh acres. The estimated cost of such a project was to be Rs. 45,000 crores, an yagnam indeed! He was praised as the modern Bhagiratha by several people.

But as soon as this project started, a lot of opposition also started. As alternatives to Pulichintala and Polavaram, several smaller projects were proposed. The people to be displaced opposed the projects. However, Pulichintala got all the clearances and the work started with some opposition. But Polavaram got stuck between forest, environment departments and opposition from other neighboring states. The present status is that it has got all the clearances and the work has begun on the canals.

Unless Jalayagnam is examined closely it will be difficult to understand the consequences. In today's circumstances any well intentioned project ends as stated below.

- The initial estimates are attractive; but costs go up 5 to 10 times as the project is completed.
- The command area would not be as big as estimated e.g. Nagarjuna Sagar Project (NSP) and Srisailem project.
- Even if the main canal is made, the smaller canals would not be done.

- Drainage facilities would not be adequate, e.g. NSP
- Leakages and breaches due to poor quality of construction would be noticed especially in canals.
- Heavier than estimated siltation due to heavy deforestation while constructing the project, leading to lower capacity of the reservoir, e.g. Nizamsagar project
- Most important is the problem of displacement. Rehabilitation is not satisfactory even in a single project constructed so far.
- The displaced had to sacrifice a lot but have not benefited, except middlemen.

YSR's jalayagnam is following the same path. In three years of jalayagnam, the costs have doubled; now he is saying "give me a 1 lakh crore, we can irrigate 1 crore acres! In one Devaduala project water has to be pumped up to the height of 1500 feet! Most of the Telengana projects are lift irrigation projects; the cost of bringing water through lift irrigation per acre works out to be Rs. 8000 to 12,000 per year. Can the government bear even the electricity bills of these projects year after year? Government wants to make drip irrigation mandatory under these projects since the water supplied is expensive. Can this be implemented? Drip irrigation has its own problems, after companies' commissions, and bribes of leaders.

In Rayalseema the Pennar watershed is the biggest. Some areas are in Tungabhadra and Krishna watersheds. Others do not come into these. How do such areas in Chittoor, Kadapa, districts get water? Rayalaseema leaders are not mindful of such watershed matters. Srisailem reservoir's watershed lies in Telengana. The Telengana leaders argue that according to international water sharing formula, water can go out of the watershed only after fulfilling the needs of the watershed. YSR's plan is that the surplus waters of Krishna can be diverted to irrigate areas in Rayalaseema. The drought prone areas of Nellore and Kadapa districts can be irrigated through Telugu Ganga project. Rayalaseema leaders come mostly from Kadapa districts, so they are linking this plan with expansion of Pothireddipadu head regulator's capacity. But this would only irrigate areas in eastern parts of Kadapa and Kurnool districts, not other areas of Rayalseema. Moreover such waters can be diverted only after giving the watershed areas of Krishna its already committed water shares, i.e. Maharashtra (565 TMC), Karanataka (695 TMC), AP (800 TMC) plus their share in surplus waters! No state is willing to endorse projects in surplus waters. That is why the Telugu Ganga, based on surplus waters, which irrigates 6.5 lakh acres, did not get Central government funds. The Handri-Neeva and Galeru-Nagari projects will also meet the same fate. In South Telengana, Nettampadu, Kalwakurthi, Srisailem Left Bank Canal projects built in Nalgonda and Mahabubnagar districts, will also meet the same destiny.

The Bachawat Award stipulated that though no state has the right of constructing any project in surplus waters, only AP can use the surplus waters. But in the year of 2000, period of Bachawat award came to an end, and with that ended AP's right to surplus waters. The Award said after 2000 the three states should come to an agreement. But instead the three states, even before 2000 ended, started constructing several projects in their respective states in great speed! If all these projects are completed, even double the waters flowing at present in Krishna would not suffice to fill up all these reservoirs! If the upstream states block the waters, what can the downstream states can do?

Fortunately there have been very good rains since the last four years. When rains are less the implications of indiscriminate construction of projects, especially on surplus waters will be known. To solve this problem, YSR had a plan; to divert some water from the Godavari river to Krishna basin at the lower end from Polavaram, so that he can use the surplus waters of Krishna at the upper end from Srisailem. This has its own problems. The people of Telengana are opposing such a diversion without first constructing projects to satisfy their own needs; secondly, there are technical and environmental problems too in Polavaram project. Of course the problem of displacement will crop up in all the projects but who cares!?

In the meantime the contractors who received advances for the jalayagnam projects are laughing all the way. They have pushed up the real estate prices around Hyderabad. The politicians have had their cuts; the sub-contractors are actually executing the projects; can we expect quality work after all the money is squandered for purposes other than the intended purpose? But the irrigation bureaucracy will obligingly push up the estimates and ultimately the burden will fall on people, but who cares?!

Another bitter truth is even after the jalayagnam projects are completed 40% of agricultural areas would still be rainfed. What would happen to these areas? We need rainfed areas too for growing certain crops like millets, pulses and oil seeds. That is why in our opinion there is no substitute to forests, watershed development, soil moisture conservation and organic farming! The *jal-jungle-jamin* struggles must continue.

Green Revolution and After

There is no doubt that green revolution did help us to become more or less self-reliant in food, nay, cereal production, but the flip side of green revolution has been daunting us since the last two decades: soils have become low in fertility due to insufficient organic matter, pesticides have become a grave health issue, yields of crops have stagnated, ground water is becoming both scarce and polluted, our genetic base and bio-diversity is shrinking. All this resulted in minus growth in agriculture by the turn of the century- this is also our achievement in 4 decades of Green Revolution. We are now reduced to

importing even cereals, not just pulses and oil seeds. WTO has further made us a pawn in international food trade and highly volatile prices and conspiracies of international cartels.

True we need a second green revolution, an evergreen revolution, but that can not come from technology like genetically modified crops. It has to come from improved organic farming, afforestation, watershed development, waterbodies restoration, pastures development, and so on. Every farmer should have at least two acre land on which he should do organic farming with local inputs peacefully with pride. Only this can be the answer for the multi-national companies which are making us dance to their tunes.

Cockroaches or Apples

The West has succeeded in reducing the number of people directly involved in agriculture. 3 to 10% of the population in these societies produces enough and more for the rest, not only in their own country but even for others – forcing them to sell or dump in the sea or give away as charity or force others to buy or not give them the food if they don't "behave." There the government gives them enough money not to produce when the market is weak...turning the entire world into a market making other societies grow other crops while we grow food for them.... Now they have made "new" technological breakthroughs, in evolving genetically modified foods which have it in their genes to fight certain pests and diseases. Now, genes from cockroaches can go into apples, from humans to animals to plants and vice versa. So that ultimately we don't know really how much of an apple or a cockroach or human being one is consuming! The BT gene crops promise better yields with less pesticide. Neither of the claims has been the reality in all seasons, everywhere. In the meantime bio-safety concerns have been pushed under the carpet gravely threatening bio-diversity, new unknown risks, like allergies, diseases, etc., some of which may be irreversible.

***Uma:** The bio-technology industry has been gearing up to introducing BT brinjal, an everyday vegetable in Indian cuisine. With some help from obliging bureaucracy and scientists it will probably succeed, in spite of opposition from civil society and prominent scientists all over the world. May be after ten years we will see the folly of this policy. But as of now a breather has come in the form of moratorium on BT Brinjal, thank God!*

The road the modern West has shown I fear is suicidal. But I am not sure of the other path(s), caught as we are in the market web...everybody wants and needs money and almost all farming and all activity is broadly tuned to that. I am really at a loss. How to get out of it? It is easy to say, "limit your wants." But it seems so difficult although it 'costs' nothing! Where does suppression of one's feelings and desires end ...and where does the joy of release from wants begin?

The broken chain of organic farming

It is in this context that one must assess the whole question of organic farming versus chemical farming. Organic farming is easier said than done in present day situation. Farmers are aware that traditional seeds are less prone to diseases and they taste better but the yields are low. Farmers know that farm yard manure is better and so is green leaf manure for paddy. But where is the farm yard manure in that quantity? The forests have gone, the cattle wealth has disappeared. Earlier the scheduled caste boys would graze the village farmers' cows for a pittance in the forests, the cows were there mainly for dung and breeding bullocks. Now all the children go to school and to maintain a farm servant is very expensive (more than Rs. 3,000/- per month). The economy has turned from bullocks to cows with the advent of milk marketing and hybrid cows. With the one or two cows they maintain, the farmers make a combination of FYM (farmyard manure), leaf manure for paddy and follow it up with chemical fertilizer application. Three tractor-loads of farm yard manure and about 150 bundles of green leaf lopped from trees meant for the purpose are put in the fields at the time of ploughing followed by three bags of urea. Some apply NPK (17x17x17) as well. They follow up the paddy crop with sugarcane planting for which no or not much farmyard manure is applied but 3 bags of 17X17X17 per acre are used in our area. They get an average yield of about 35 to 40 tonnes of cane per acre.

The question that bothers me is as to why farmers are not taking to composting, vermicompost, etc. which are supposed to fill the void of lack of enough dung and also enrich the farmyard manure? That question I better ask myself. Even after 20 years of stay in the village I myself did not get down to it. For me the reasons were: to make compost one needs to have mud and leaf transported to the spot where the cattle are and where the dung is being heaped. This requires additional expense. I have no tractor which means I have to hire tractor and labour for the purpose. Now of course I have the tiller but where do I get the mud from? Since most wastelands have been occupied, one has to go to the tank bed. One might as well put the tank mud and the leaf manure and the dung directly on the soil and they would get composted right there with lesser expense/trouble – so the argument goes. It is not easy to find labour when needed, besides this is additional work for the person who is tending the cattle, but perhaps all these are excuses not very convincing. After a lot of procrastination, I got down to vermicomposting in earnest, but I am unable to do it on a continuous basis for various reasons, mainly, the workers' reluctance to keep it going.

However, in spite of all these problems, the organic farmers are doggedly at it as they realize the destructive nature of chemical-industrial farming. So also we have tried with mixed successes. The main principles in organic farming are: keep the soil healthy, look

at nature as a friend, not as an adversary, respect the rhythm of nature. Several soil health enrichment measures have been formulated, several plant protection methods have been adopted, seasonality and the bio-rhythms of crops have been studied and respected, and so on. Nature does its own balancing act. But in nature balance, harmony, equilibrium and co-existence are not how we imagine. It is not exactly a peaceful co-existence out there! Violence, the big brother bullying, the insects, pests, cyclones, earthquakes, etc. are as much a part of nature as cooperation and co-existence.



CHAPTER 2

Dairying: Who is Milking Whom?

Cattle are an important link in our farming (unlike Fukuoka's). As already mentioned bullocks have almost disappeared from the scene making way for milch cows. And we too tried our hand at dairying. We employed one person to look after the cows at a modest salary of Rs.600 per month (which he would make up through the hearty meals three times a day at our house and other perks). We raised grass and bought groundnut cake every month along with rice bran. We often ran out of rice straw which sometimes we had to buy at great cost. Initially, we were thinking of raising some local breeds – the famous Punganur breed, which are now not traceable thanks to the extensive cross breeding. We settled for cross-bred cows with a greater percentage of the local/natural blood. We raised grass and during the first couple of years we did not incur any loss as we were using some of the milk for our home consumption and selling the rest. But gradually, the price of oil cake began to rise. Initially it was the same price as the milk. But now milk sells at Rs.10 per liter while groundnut cake costs nearly twice and more! And then we started making losses. For the last three years we were spending Rs.10, 000 per year extra! This was unsustainable. So we retired our cow man (who anyway had to be retired as we had given him the job of looking after the cows as a stop gap arrangement) with a ten thousand rupees fixed deposit in his name.

A farmer has to feed at least one kg of cake to the cow every day. So most farmers don't go by the rules...they feed their cows on the grass that they gather from the fields and what they grow, during the 6 months from July to December. From January they feed them on sugarcane leaf, which is freely available when farmers are making jaggery, till April; and in lean summer months, from April to June on groundnut leaf and horse gram leaf and so on... keeping buying oil cake and rice bran to the minimum, giving them only to lactating cows. See Table III for economics of dairying.

As for our cows, we decided the better thing would be to lease it out to another worker who offered to do so, staying in our garden, and taking 2/3rd of the payment from sale of milk and giving us 1/3rd, the 2/3 rd including the cake and bran etc . We paid for any sickness and we also gave straw from our paddy crop and whatever crop residues we

got. He in turn was to give us all of the farmyard manure produced. But this didn't last long. We transferred the cows to another worker for one liter of milk per day, and the rest he could sell and keep the sale proceeds. He was supposed to give us one calf and keep the other calf for himself. He was also supposed to give us farmyard manure. When the cow got sold he was supposed to give us half the amount. It worked for a few years with a lot of grumbling from the worker. We still have one cow but it is waiting to be sold when we get a reasonable price. Today many farmers have given up keeping cows, preferring to buy milk than go into all this trouble.

In Chittoor district dairying is as important as farming since the region suffers from frequent droughts and farming is not always profitable. The Operation Flood brought a lot of relief to farmers in the district who earned a steady income from dairying. But as explained above that too is becoming more and more difficult and farmers are leaving it just as they are leaving farming.

Uma: *Whenever I think of women farmers, the image that comes to my mind is that of an undernourished/ emaciated woman holding the strings of a fat, well-fed cow, walking in front of her, returning after a good grazing in the evening. The women are mainly responsible for dairying. They milk the cows, clean the cowshed, stall- feed the cows, bathe them and take them out for grazing. Men also pitch in all the works, especially grazing, if they are free. With the breakdown of joint families the women have to do both house work and help in agricultural operations, without any help from either family members or workers. I find slowly they are giving up dairying, although that gives them ready cash flow for their household expenses.*



Murder of milk cooperatives

In the meantime, what is saddening is the way the government has killed the milk co-operative movement initially promoted by it. When the cooperative movement was at its peak, milk sales were high and did a lot for improving the farmers' lot. Traditionally milk was never an essential item in the diet of people in this region. Cows were kept to breed bullocks and the little milk they gave was used for children, and buttermilk was consumed. When milk cooperatives were started farmers took to keeping hybrid cows with much enthusiasm, since they were paid every week or fifteen days. The money took care of all the minor routine expenses.

Elections to the cooperatives right from the village to the district level were a big political affair and even the secretary of the cooperative at the village used to make a lot of money, taking a little extra milk officially for testing and asking people to pour over the brim of the liter measured, etc. The milk for testing would never be tested. The society dairy was soon reeking of corruption and they were unable to pay bills to farmers for milk supplied to them for over a year! After much agitation, the bills were paid, but the cycle repeated. At this juncture the Government allowed private dairies to operate, with our Chief Minister Chandra Babu Naidu (in opposition then) taking a lead by starting a big dairy (Heritage Foods). The private dairies have formed a cartel and they do not raise the price of milk, despite there being several buyers (so much for the multi buyer model of the World Bank). Now one cannot see big dairies of milk producers, anywhere in our area because they are simply not economical. Selling milk as middlemen is more profitable! So farmers manage their cows by grazing them and feeding them as little oil cake and bran as possible. This implies a decrease in milk yield but then the costs work out. Often the milk is also diluted.

As far as diseases were concerned, local breeds were much more resistant to diseases than cross breeds. People treated their cattle with traditional remedies. It was only when these failed that they resorted to the government veterinary care which, just like allopathic treatment, is prohibitively expensive. Of course, there were outbreaks of dangerous diseases like anthrax and there are foot and mouth disease advertisements at every veterinary hospital. But nobody panics the way they are reacting in Britain and the West. Of course, you cannot feed crushed bones and skull to vegetarian cows and expect nothing to happen. The main problem is that they are undernourished as feeds and fodder have become prohibitively expensive; this in a country where cows are revered. Bullocks have almost become extinct, with tractors and motors taking their place. Organic farming may give a new lease of life to cattle, since FYM demand would increase.

Table III
Economics of Dairying: Comparative Performance of
< 6 litre yielding cows (9 farmers) and > 6 litre yielding cows (7 farmers)
(@ 2007 prices)

S.No.	Particulars	<6 litre category	>6 litre category
1.	Average yield (soon after delivery)	4.03	6.79
2	Total yield under one lactation in litres	1740	3754
3	No. months before next delivery	14.5	15.6
4	Value of farmyard manure (FYM) produced in rupees	596	711
5	Value of calf produced in rupees	600	1357
6.	Cost of feed (grass, feed, cake, etc.) per day	24	40
7.	No. of times Artificial insemination	2.3	1.7
8	No.of times crossing with bulls	0.6	0.9
9	Insurance	2 out of 9(22%)	4 out of 7(57%)
10	Medical expenses	Rs.111/- (2 out of 9)	Rs.165/- 2 out of 7
11	Total Cost of production	Rs.20957	Rs. 31336
12	Total cost of production per month in rupees	1474	1852
13	Cost of production of milk/litre	Rs.12.56	Rs.8.35
14	Sale price of milk (Rs./ Per litre)	Rs. 8.69	Rs. 8.11
15	Total Income from all sources	Rs.16307	Rs.32644
16	Net income from all sources per month at current sale price	Minus Rs.339	Rs.116
17	Net income per month @ Rs.9 per litre	Rs.142	Rs.217
18	Net income per month @ Rs.10 per litre	Rs.75	Rs.494
19	Net income per month @ Rs.12 per litre	Rs. 188	Rs. 836
20	Net income per month @ Rs.15 per litre	Rs.543	Rs.1604

Alternate energy the crying need

Along with our cattle we had also maintained a *gobar* gas plant which was giving enough gas for one meal with dung from three cows – not very efficient. It was a concrete dome Chinese model, we are told, which gave way after ten years. It developed cracks in the dome and we could not restore it much as we tried. So now we have LPG cooking gas from the nearby town, so much for bio-gas. But the new Janatha model

introduced by the Government is smaller and more efficient. A small family is able to manage its cooking over it with two cows – feeding four people. Two families in the village are having this. The others do not have either enough space or motivation.

The question that bothers me is as to why are *gobar* gas plants not picking up? Why do people in villages also want to have gas cylinders? Now an elaborate system has developed in every village around ours by which empty cylinders are transported to the nearest gas agent and replacement delivered for a fee (Rs.20/- per cylinder). The state government has a scheme by which gas connections are given to women in the DWCRAs groups. These often ended up at the houses of better-off farmers as gas costs money. But increasingly women prefer to cook in gas stoves with LPG, and bio-gas has few takers. This is unfortunate because we are importing petroleum products to the tune of 75% of our needs for about Rs. 2 lakh crores. Bio-gas can meet this requirement substantially, but the concerned departments are sleeping over it. In the meantime people are hoping gas from Krishna–Godavari basin will solve our problem. But will it? For how long?

In the meantime YSR government started promoting bio-fuels like *jatropha*, with heavy incentives, but it has sort of fizzled out for various reasons! Such foolish schemes will definitely undermine our food security, which we can ill afford.

Health is wealth

The question of health and treatment of the sick also needs to be mentioned here. In our eagerness to promote cheap and local health traditions we also wanted to promote Ayurveda. But as our core fund had diminished to a mere four lakhs even before we started, the amount we were willing to pay, Rs. 2000/- per month to an ayurvedic doctor was not attractive enough to any doctor – even a fresh graduate! There are three Registered Medical Practitioners (RMPs) at the central village close to our village. The nearest MBBS doctor is 10 kms away. An allopathic doctor-friend of ours started weekly visits. He would not want to give medicines and injections unnecessarily. Initially people did not respond to him. Slowly his friendly ways and his willingness to explain and listen, made him acceptable, and many patients go to him regularly nowadays. We were also handing out medicines – allopathic, homeopathic and ayurvedic as desired by the patient (the choice was mostly left to him/her), but patients nearly always preferred allopathic medicines because of their capacity to give immediate relief. This is what the RMPs told us too. That whatever medicine we administer it must give immediate relief. The rest of the real treatment can follow. We tried to give a refresher course to the RMPs through our doctor friend, but after the first two classes they decided it was not worth the effort! The agricultural workers especially feel that they cannot afford to lose a day's labour/wages. So, they go for quick relief treatment, if things get complicated they go to the nearby town or even Tirupati. Our doctor-friend, for personal reasons, stopped

coming but continues to give medical advice over the phone and sees the patients we send to him free of cost. It is indeed a great relief to have a doctor whom you can trust not to give unnecessary medicines, nor to recommend unnecessary examinations, to talk sympathetically and in a friendly manner to patients, not to fleece patients where doctors thrive on disease and ignorance. It must be remembered that getting checked up by the doctor is only half the story. When they go to town, however sick they may be, a movie is a must, as well as buying odd things. So the sickness comes in handy.

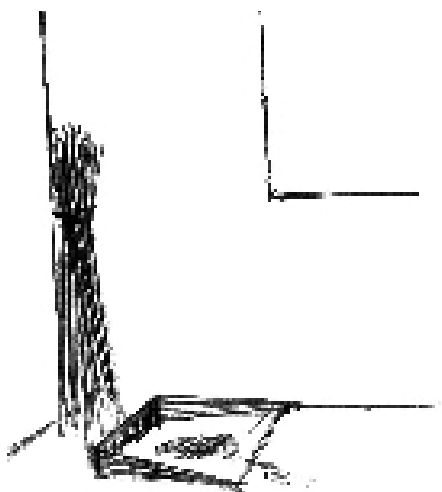
Cleanliness is only Next to Godliness

Uma: Before we moved to the village lock stock and barrel we used to live with Naren's uncle whenever we visited the village. Village homes were not kept neat and tidy like the city homes. In our house, not only the workers ate in the kitchen, but a calf would be tied there and dogs and cats were always around. There were not enough plates for everyone, nor for putting a lid over all the food dishes. After one batch of people ate, the plates would be barely washed with a little water, and handed over to the next batch of people waiting to have meals. The men sat around in the huge hall, which was the drawing-living room, smoking, throwing the beedi butts around, there the women cleaned and cut the vegetables and other food stuffs, etc. The dining table which was kept there would have the last batch of dined plates for a long time, with flies dining on the leftovers. Naren's aunt used to joke, "if you had visited the village before marriage, you would never have married Naren." However, whenever I complained about cleanliness, Naren never failed to remind me "cleanliness is only next to godliness." Naren laughed off all the troubles, always had a joke in hand or a turn of phrase, to lighten the mood.

It was interesting that when I visited some farmers' homes in the USA I very much felt at home: they were as unkempt as ours- tools, books and papers, grains, seeds, medicines for humans and livestock, decorative pieces, photographs...all in the drawing-cum-living room!

Unpolished is Uncouth

While agricultural worker households still are uncontaminated by and large by tea and coffee, for most farmer households these have become compulsory. Beedi smoking and betel leaf chewing with tobacco are also very common. And by their standards a fortune is spent on these beverages every month. People also insist on



having only polished rice. Our efforts to induce them to eat unpolished rice have been in vain. In fact at times, especially when there are guests, we are forced to prepare meals with polished rice. Some times workers protest and refuse to eat our unpolished rice, so that we have had to cook separately for them. One is also reminded of the village bus. People are willing to stand for hours rather than walk up a kilometer to the next stop.

Uma: Naren never used the car for social work purposes. He used to go around in buses and autorickshaws. He never tired of walking. In the last twenty years he did six to seven padayatras in the district, each lasting three to seven days! The car was used for medical emergencies (especially when complications arose during deliveries, snake bites, etc.), to ferry old people and guests from the bus/train stations, and when the children came, for occasional picnics to nearby places. He used to drive slowly and cautiously, taking care to avoid the pits and holes on the roads, and he would be often found driving on the wrong side of the road; my sister-in-law used to quip, "Naren drives as if the car would get hurt or he may step on the ants and frogs on the road!"

Giving up isn't every thing

Before summing up the dilemmas in agriculture, I must mention Nagesh and Aparna, the US returned computer engineers, who want to lead a Gandhian life of self-sufficiency based on agriculture. They joined us around 1994. They have purchased their own plot, to have a "free hand," turning down our offer of taking some of our land on lease. Ever since they bought the plot three years ago they have done anything but farming! – running from the revenue officials to the court to the police to the village bigwigs. They were twice cheated out of the deals they almost clinched. And the final deal was with a person who had exchanged a piece of land with his neighbour cum relative promising him the land but sold it to Nagesh. So, the battle dragged on for months and years, till the neighbour sold his share to a third party who continues the battle! So much for buying land and farming. Yet, they have courageously stuck on. They are perhaps the only couple to live in a Dalitwada with this kind of purpose in mind. They are of course finding the going tough. Most people are not honest, irrespective of caste and class in the village. Most of the time people speak half-truths allowing themselves some space for maneuver lest they change their minds later on! But in a crisis people do gather together. They find the life of this couple very odd and unexplainable. In the first place, nobody had invited them to stay in the Dalitwada! Now that they have adopted a baby girl from an orphanage, they find them even more queer, they imagine that Aparna did not want to go through the pains of labour and so she bought a child!

Nagesh soon got involved in organizing a VSS in which my cousin Krishnamurthy and a few youngsters from Dalitwada also contributed actively. For Nagesh it is dream come true, for he had been dreaming of growing trees for years, except that it gave him even more headaches and heart aches! He has been struggling for several years to keep it going with the help of farmers, SCs and STs, but the importance of forests for our survival is still not being appreciated enough by people.

Uma: Many people think that we gave up a lot in going and living in a village. Although electricity was there, power cuts were so frequent that it was as good as not having electricity. Therefore although we had a television we could not see much; besides, our TV was so old that if we the visuals came, the audio went off, and vice versa. The fridge also went into repairs soon and if we wanted to repair it we had to take it to Tirupati, which was too much trouble, so we just decided to do without it. Many years later a friend who worked in a refrigerator agency took it and got it repaired. The village bus did only two or three trips inside the village, so we learnt to walk a lot. The phones often went dead (nowadays of course everybody has mobiles), news papers were not delivered daily, computers were non-existent in the initial years. When they did come, the internet was so slow that for us it was just a better typewriter. For a person used to life in a city, village life would be too slow and boring perhaps. But for us who were living there, there was enough and more work to do, people worked all the time, but always in no hurry.

I have been living in Hyderabad city since three years. If someone asks me to mention one thing I miss of Venkatramapuram, I would say, the moon. I hardly see the moon or the stars in Hyderabad. In Vpuram on the full moon day the moon would spread an ethereal white coat on everything. The star studded skies complete with the milky way never failed to mesmerize me. I rarely ever missed admiring the sun rise and sun set. The soft breeze which blew all the time made the summers tolerable. The deep silence, broken only by the sound of birds or cicadas or a cow mooing or someone talking, got into your bones and the body and mind relaxed automatically. This was evident when friends came to visit us. Most of them would sleep as if they were never slept before! When the rains came, with lightning and thunder, and the weather became cool, and the lakes and the wells filled up, the frogs started croaking and ducks and the water birds descended, there would be a spring in the farmers gait too, for they hope, perhaps foolishly, may be the next crop will be better?!



CHAPTER 3

*The World of Agricultural Workers,
Untouchability and Land Reforms*

The agriculture worker lives in his own world... a world shared by the farmer, more than anybody else, but still it is a world of his own. Most of them belong to the Mala and the Madiga castes which come under the Schedule Castes (SC) category. Unlike the farmer, the agriculture worker is more of a day-to-day living mindset. There is little conception of saving or acquiring property (some of them do so, though rarely). When there is money, they tend to spend lavishly but are capable of missing a meal or two and surviving on precious little. Although they are living in the midst of agriculture they have to buy almost everything that they need or want – rice, oil, vegetables, soaps, clothes, sandals, medicines and nowadays even electricity for the single bulb they use. Some have prospered, thanks to reservations, education, jobs in railways, working in the towns (and now the NREG). But these are the odd balls.

Past and present

Compared to 40-50 years ago there have been tremendous changes in certain aspects and precious little in other ways. It is difficult to generalize, not even on a local scale. One has to continuously qualify the class of the agriculture worker with his caste, region, etc. But still there is something that sets the agriculture worker apart from the farmer. In our area, almost all the workers have some piece of land, at least ½ an acre, mostly dry land on which they sow groundnut and sometimes even horse gram. The more enterprising even try out tomato during the rainy season. Almost all the families of the SCs in our village are doubling as tenants for somebody or the other. While the older male works as the tenant, his wife would go for work as a daily wage earner, the son would be a part of a youth gang who do work on “contract”, earning a fast buck (and blowing it up partly). Girls especially do a lot of domestic chores and are ready for agriculture work at the tender age of 10 to 12. Most of them are married off by the time they are 14-16, some just after reaching puberty. People justify child marriage as prevention against illegitimate sex before marriage. (However, what is surprising is that marriage seems a sort of license. Extra marital affairs and flings are very common, not taken too seriously! This is the case even among the farmers, although the frequency is higher among the workers and goes by the caste of the people involved as well.)

Four-five decades ago, my grand father and later uncle had around 10 farm servants working throughout the year. One to look after the hundred odd sheep, one for the 20-40 buffaloes, one for the 40 to 60 cows, four pairs of bullocks, looked after by at least two persons, one or two in the kitchen. There was hardly any tenancy. All agriculture work would be done with farm servants and hired labour. Unless a severe drought struck (once in 15-20 years) there was always work and always food. No one needed to go hungry. The food consisted of rice cooked with ragi made into balls, called “sankatti,” with some pickle or hot curry to gulp it down, with some buttermilk at times, especially in summer. There was also jowar and other millets which were more cumbersome to cook. Even smaller farmers had paid servants working on yearly basis. The children would start as cattle – grazers or goat/shepherds and graduate finally to ploughing with bullocks and preparing the paddy fields – the toughest jobs. The forest was in plenty and lot of things could be obtained “free” – fire wood, bamboo and wood for the housing, implements.



70 to 80% of the agriculture workers in our area are from the Scheduled Castes (mostly Malas) and live in Dalitwada. The Wadders who are a community specializing in stone and earth work (these are sub groups within them) also work as hired labour, but generally take work on a contract basis. There was tremendous demand for them for digging wells in the past. But now with the advent of bore wells they have been confined to public works such as roads and buildings and large scale farm works. They charge a higher rate than the SC workers. They are famous for taking advances before starting a work and demanding more and more. By the time the work is completed (they would have contracted elsewhere) they would have already extracted 25 to 50% more. More than any other community they are into heavy drinking and lax in sexual behaviour. Of late, they are under severe strain with the advent of poclains or earth movers for road works.

For the SC workers, their clothing has improved. So also their toiletry. The women especially have shifted to polyester – it is cheaper and longer lasting. The men still do wear some cottons but the younger lot are also increasingly into polyester and pants. The younger generation insists on buying expensive soaps for bathing. There is electricity in every house. In a hamlet of 80 odd houses of SCs there are 5 TV sets, about 10 fans, and an equal number of tape recorders/radios. Most of them have only one bulb per house. Pukka houses are coming up with government assistance (50,000/- per unit). Invariably people spend much more and build a reasonably bigger house, “for one builds a house just once in a life time.” The Dalitwada also has a water tank. Some families have shifted to Tirupati, working in hospitals, restaurants and in construction work. One lady managed to become a doctor in government service, two have joined the police and one became a librarian in the university and even installed a telephone for his parents in the village, so that he can keep in touch with them.

Nowadays (for the past 20 odd years) almost all the SC boys and girls go to school. But what a school! Although the teachers are reasonably well paid (Rs.4000 to Rs.10,000/- per month) they are mostly very reluctant to teach with any sense of responsibility. Most of the children learn things by heart and write, but can hardly read numbers or recognize letters. There is no way any of these children can ever become even attenders, let alone doctors and engineers. The schools in upper caste hamlets are no better.

Earlier, 40-50 years ago, the workers were paid in kind, there was hardly any cash payment- five “padis” of paddy, i.e. 2 1/2 kg per day for men and same for women. The young boys tending the cattle were hardly paid anything except food – 5 to 6 rupees per year. The older farm servants worked for a pittance of Rs.50/- to 60/- for one year and fed thrice a day. Nowadays thanks to NREG, the wages for women are Rs.80/- to Rs.100/- per day plus a meal for the afternoon. For men it has changed from Rs.35/- to Rs.50 without food and Rs.100/- to Rs.120/- with food. And for tough work like fencing, cutting trees etc. they demand more. The closer one is to the town, the costlier is the labour and more difficult to get. The work hours vary from region to region, even within a distance of a few kilometers. In some places they come for work early in the morning and close by the afternoon. In others, like in our place, they usually work from around 9-9.30 a.m. to 4.30 to 5 p.m. with an hour break in the afternoon. Given the low price of paddy and the subsidised rice scheme for the poor, wages have indeed risen although not fully sufficient to allow a family to live decently. There is a tremendous difference in wage rate and employment between dry and wet regions, the drier parts of western Chittoor district and neighbouring Anantapur district. We should note the seasonal migration of labour to wet regions. Despite the absence of a union, once a wage rate increases, it is rare for it to go down – a sense of camaraderie prevails.

Uma: *The women agricultural workers have been greatly benefited by the DWCR (Development of Women and Children in Rural Areas) movement. Almost every woman*

from across all castes in the village is a member of a DWCRA group. They have become the major customers of banks in rural areas. They attend the meetings regularly and enthusiastically, and they have been able to avail loans for various purposes- cows, house construction, children's education, marriage, etc. Their horizons have broadened, and confidence much higher. Nowadays they find it demeaning to work as domestic workers in high caste homes. They dress colorfully, move about a lot, often outside the village, either singly or in groups, speak to officials quite confidently and so on.

There are agricultural workers from other castes as well. Especially from our neighbouring village of Reddys and Balijas, a large number of whom used to go for daily wage. But today, things have changed tremendously in this caste village. Most of the boys have studied reasonably up to intermediate and some even up to post-graduation. Six boys are in the army and allied services (after paying heavy bribes for recruitment). A few are railway employees and two are teachers. On the whole there is hardly a thatched hut anymore in the village. Almost every other house has a TV (they are mostly small and marginal farmers). Now very few of them go to work as workers. Interestingly, most small and marginal farmers including those having some wet lands are in possession of ration cards for subsidised rice, although everybody speaks as if it is only the SCs who are enjoying this privilege and not turning up for work.

The haves and the have-nots

If one were to make a class analysis, to compare the situation prevailing about 40 years ago, (in the 1960s) there were quite a few big landlords. My uncle (and father combined) controlled around 90 acres. The Reddy landlord (B) in the neighbouring village controlled some 400 and odd acres. A third Reddy landlord in a village, let's say C, controlled something like 200 acres. A Reddy in village 'D' further down controlled about 1000 acres. A couple of kilometers down the line a Komati Setty family also controlled over a 1000 acres. They used to lend money even to the then Palegar Zamindar and acquired substantial land through money lending and over-due interest payments. The Palegar-zamindar of the area declined soon after the abolition of the zamindar estates in the 1950s itself, thanks to their bad habits of wine, and women and little education. The Reddy from village C used to work as a sort of accountant to the Palegar and acquired a lot of wasteland and other lands misusing his position. But his sons got into drink and squandered the entire (or almost entire) property within one generation. Many of the members of this family have shifted out of the village, one of them even to the USA. The Settys, thanks to the Land Ceiling Act and the growing political weight of the Reddys after independence, also disposed off most of their lands and many of their family members have migrated to urban areas.

The 1000-acre owning Reddy family (D) is well established and prospered through handloom business in the earlier days and acquired a lot of land in the area. They have

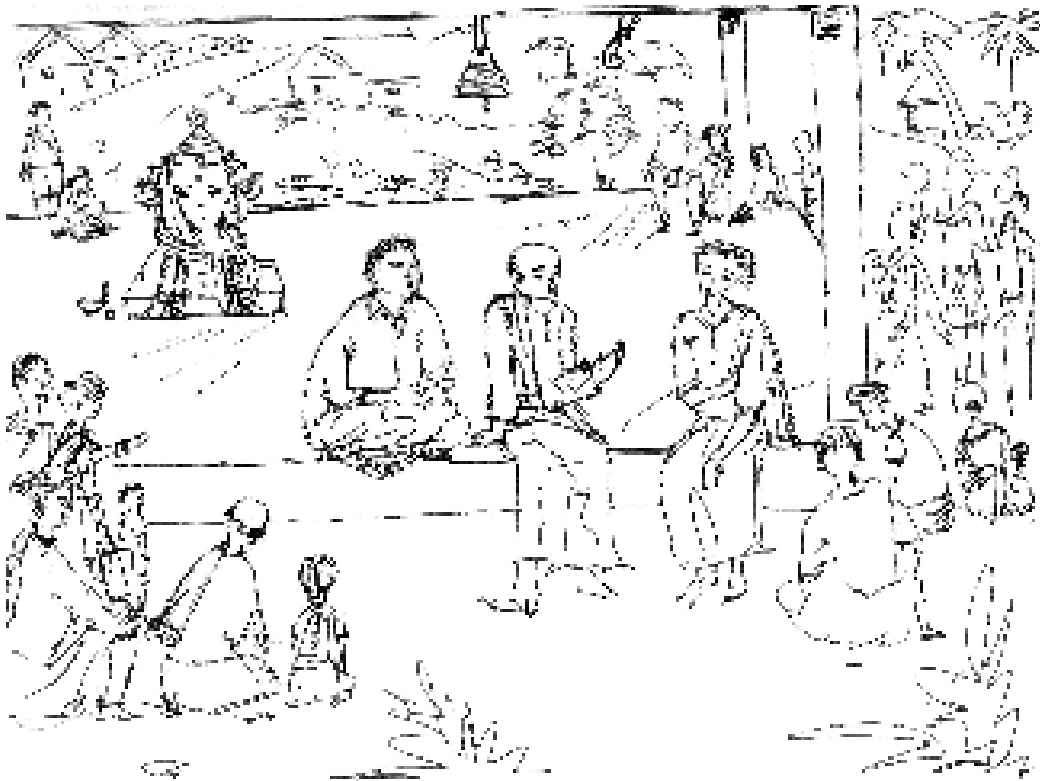
large tracts of coconut and mango gardens. The younger generation (after the initial founder) started a confectionery factory (Nutrine) in Chittoor and has done very well, apart from a small ground nut oil crushing unit. Thanks to the Land Ceiling Act they too divided their land into apparently several bits. They have surrendered over 100 acres of dry lands to the government on paper which was redistributed to the poor. The title deeds continue to be with these landlords although the local poor know that they are the technical owners. But no one dares to question.

Our neighbour, the Landlord B still controls about 100 acres. After distributing his 400+ acres (much of it acquired through liquor business in the British period) in the names of his 6 children and himself, shifting categories of land to accommodate the maximum, he ultimately surrendered some 5 acres to the government which was distributed among some SCs who happen to be his farm servants. The lands continue to be in his possession and enjoyment (surrounded by lands of the Reddy landlord). If any enquiry is done officially, the title holders will reply that they are the owners and enjoying the land! This particular family has enjoyed some political clout, having been aggressive. But the son of the landlord has since shifted to Bangalore and another to Chennai much earlier. They have businesses in Chennai and even Singapore and Bangalore. They have also set up a juice factory based on mango pulp right at the village. One grandson of the landlord has returned from the city and has taken charge and seems to be doing reasonably well. With the rise of Telugu Desam this family's political clout has dwindled. They still continue on a small scale, holding "durbars" (court) and settling disputes between villagers belonging to some 15 villages around.

Thanks to the traditional rivalry between the Kammas and Reddys (both Sudra peasant castes) the Kammas of the surrounding villages resent the suzerainty of the Reddy landlord. The Reddys of our neighboring hamlets resent the weight of my uncle and proclaim loyalty to the Reddy landlord of the neighboring village! In our family, while my grandfather built up the assets through his aggressive buying and converting into mango gardens and doing mango business (initiating it in the area), my uncle lacked the initiative and hardly added another 20 acres. My father was in government service at Hyderabad and the property was divided between the two, with a little extra going to my uncle. Except for one, the children of my uncle have not been very enterprising and they have more or less managed to keep their share of property of around 12 acres each. One son (who studied up to M.Phil in Economics) runs a mango business in the neighbouring market in season and is doing fairly well for himself, but has not done well enough to acquire more land. For our family, I (mis)manage the farmland of mine as well as that of my two brothers (36 acres) for Rs.36,000 annually and a 1/3rd share in the returns. Of my two brothers, one retired from the army as a Lt. Colonel and another is a lawyer. Both are settled in Hyderabad.

Uma: *Most of the disputes are resolved at the level of the village first at informal sittings presided over by the elders agreed upon by both the disputing parties. These are called*

madhyasthams, roughly translatable as arbitration. When madhyasthams fail people go to the police and courts. These arbitrations happened regularly over a wide range of issues: boundary disputes, partition dissatisfactions, marital matters, skirmishes among brothers, inter-caste disputes, etc. These were held usually at the temple, and often started late at night, after dinner. The madhyasthams are a very interesting affair. The elders are masters at the game of bringing out the truth from the horses' mouth. They start with a free for all by the disputing parties, with a lot of din and noise, shouting and posturing, a kind of letting off the steam. After a round of this, the elders calm them down and start the proceedings and deftly make the parties themselves to confess their wrongs. At the end even the punishment would look as if the wrong doers themselves decided upon it!



Naren was often asked to be in the chair (along with others). He would often decline because he was otherwise engaged, but people would insist, and even wait for many days, so that they could ensure his presence. I suppose they had a lot of faith in his neutrality, impartiality and kindness. Even before the madhyasthams he would be briefed of different versions by the disputing parties and others. Being an early riser, he often found it difficult to be awake too late. So he would go to these madhyastahms, listen for a while, and then lie down and sleep! The madhyastham would proceed and when it reaches a critical stage, he would be woken up and briefed. If he agreed to the conclusions, there it would end. But

sometimes Naren would still have doubts, which he would not let go. Everybody would then pounce on him, “first of all you are not available, then you come and sleep, and now you ask questions!” But no madhyastham would happen without him!

The new rich

A Kamma family from our neighbouring village closely related to us, is typical of the rise of the new class of landlord- political leader. During my grandfather's time, they had about half the size of our property (around 50 acres). The eldest among them was hard working, tight fisted and enterprising. He used to run a small tin shed cinema theatre, locally partnered a rice mill and a tractor along with my uncle and kept buying a lot of dry land cheaply and converting it into mango gardens. Even after dividing with his brothers he has managed to hold on to 100 acres for his four sons, mostly in mango gardens. His eldest son is active in Telugu Desam and aspiring to be an M.L.A. in the near future; he has landed several contracts for road works, made a neat profit of around Rs.10 lakhs in just one such contract two years ago and has not looked back. The joint family now owns a pocklain and three tractors. Most of the political leaders in the area are typically contractors cum wine shop dealers cum owners of big mango gardens (100 to 200 acres sometimes more). The bigger ones have businesses in cities as well. They have together succeeded in making elections a very expensive affair with drinks, and cash flowing freely. An M.L.A. election could cost the candidate anywhere between 30 lakh to 2 crores!

Most of the farmers in our area have very small holdings. A farmer having 100 guntas (7 acres) of wet land is considered rich, and by village standards, he is indeed rich. However due to the depressing agriculture scenario, almost everybody is trying to get out! Everyone wants his children to study and get a good job in the city or do some business.

Elections have however been a positive turning point in class and caste relations. Earlier, the local landlord's word was law. Since the time of Mrs. Indira Gandhi as Prime Minister in the Seventies, there has been a dramatic change especially with regard to the SCs. Distribution of government lands to the SCs, housing schemes, special laws to protect them, and her efforts at an alliance of castes against the landed castes, her constant refrain of garibi hatao (“remove poverty”) and saving the SCs, and the landed class's abuses hurled against her, endeared her to Dalits (SCs) so much so that she soon became an “amma,” a “mother” for them. At many places fierce struggles took place to allow the Dalits to cast their vote freely for the Congress party. The landed gentry of Reddys and Kammas (mostly in this area) fiercely opposed them, themselves supporting the Janatha party. With the rise of the Telugu Desam of NTR (backed by Kammas and Backward Castes) followed by Chandra Babu Naidu, the Congress has resumed its role as a Reddy party (much more emphatically than ever). But the question that we may ask is where are the Dalits and other poor BCs predominantly agricultural workers – politically, socially and economically?

One is reminded of Victor Hugo's comment about "the ruling class willing to do everything for the poor/downtrodden except get off their back" that aptly sums up the situation.

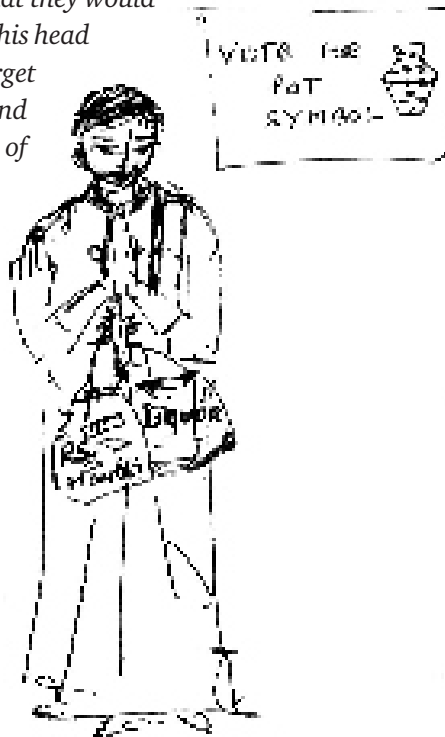
Uma: Talking about elections, unlike in urban India, people take a lot of trouble to come and vote. People living outside the village take the trouble to reach the village by trains and buses just to vote. People say, "If I don't vote, isn't it like I am dead?" Booth capturing has become a thing of the past, at least in our village. And there is a story behind it.

The first election we encountered, that was about twenty five odd years ago, was a big turning point for the election process in our village. The voting booth was in the neighboring panchayat dominated by the Reddys. By the time people from our village reached the booth, all our votes had already been cast by the youth of the Reddy community! And we were shooed back. This was too much for Naren. He took it up and petitioned the government for a separate booth to be located in our own panchayat. When the next elections came around we had a separate booth in our panchayat. Naren actively campaigned within the panchayat urging everyone to vote freely without fear, and to desist from proxy voting.

On the day of the elections, voting was already on its way, when suddenly a group of youth from the same village, drunk, carrying sticks, cycle chains, shouting abuses, descended on the booth and started beating up some of the voters lined up in the queue.

I was watching this scene and was mortally afraid that they would rein some blows on Naren's bald head, and that's all, his head would crack up. But for some reason they didn't target Naren or me; we both started to calm them down and managed to send them away, but only after a lot of scuffle.

Naren didn't leave it at that. He petitioned for re-poll with police protection. A re-poll was permitted and was conducted peacefully. That gave confidence to the people both in the system and Naren. Since then every election has been conducted in our village without any trouble and without any proxy voting. However we have not been able to stop the heinous practice of distributing money and liquor before elections. Candidates from all the major parties distribute money and liquor the night or two before elections. Elections have become a festival time for the Dalitwadās. They accept money from all the parties and vote precisely for whoever they



want. They say, we didn't ask for either money or liquor; but if they come on their own, why not accept? Meanwhile political consciousness has increased and booth capturing has become much less throughout the state, at least much less strident.

Today, 9th March 2010, the Women's Reservation Bill has been passed in Rajya Sabha, as I sit down to write, I can not help recall how I could have become the Sarpanch of my panchayat. In one of the previous elections our panchayat was reserved for women candidates. Two women had come forward, one was a Dalit, and the other was from the Kamma caste, whose husband had political ambitions. I said to Naren that I too will contest. I was sure I would be elected unanimously and I would make a better Sarpanch than them. I said the Dalit lady had no chance of winning, and if the other lady wins, it would be her husband who would be the de-facto Sarpanch. But Naren vetoed the idea, he said when a Dalit lady stands, we should give her a chance and support her rather than contest ourselves. I gave in, and as expected, the Dalit lady lost, and the Kamma lady won, and her husband was at the helm for the next term. To be fair, he did initiate several developmental schemes for the panchayat. I too have no regrets, for I found later that each work meant several trips to the relevant departments in Pakala and Chittoor, and bribes to the staff, for which the Sarpanches had to shell out money from their own pockets, which they later made good through small contracts or adjustments in books; and I could have never done all that!

Castes and Untouchability: Between Gandhi and Ambedkar

"The 'untouchable' to me, is compared to us, really a Harijan—a man of God and we are 'Durjan' (men of evil). For whilst the 'untouchable' has toiled and moiled and dirtied his hands so that we may live in comfort and cleanliness, we have delighted in suppressing him. We are solely responsible for all the shortcomings and faults that we lay at the door of these 'untouchables.' It is still open to us to be Harijan ourselves, but we can only do so by heartily repenting our sins against them." Mahatma Gandhi.

"You must abolish your slavery yourselves. Do not depend for its abolition upon God or a superman. Your salvation lies in political power and not in making pilgrimages and observance of fasts." B.R. Ambedkar

Despite our background in sociology the first shock in the village was the practice of untouchability. I knew that SCs (scheduled castes) were not allowed inside the houses of other caste people. But being part of a household in which you could not take your SC friends /acquaintances inside, gave me a queasy feeling to say the least. It prompted me to build a separate house for my family as quickly as possible. (It was also required for reasons of other conveniences as well). But the extent of the practice was really appalling and I realized this only when I started living in the village. At the tea shops in

the central village, SCs are allotted separate glasses which would be hanging by a wire loop or kept aside at a corner visible for all those who should know. An SC wanting tea/coffee has to take the glass and hold it while the tea shop owner would pour the tea from a height. The SC gentleman after drinking the tea has to hold the glass again for the owner to pour some water so that the SC customer can wash the glass and keep it back in its pristine position. This in the 1980s!

SCs are not allowed into the eating places. They have to stand or sit outside or on special benches inside especially allotted for them. They would not be served in plates but in leaves which after they finish eating they would have to pick up and throw outside. There are stone slabs outside or in the center of each village or raised platforms under a tree on which people squat and chit chat, read newspapers, or settle disputes. But SCs dare not sit on them... especially at bus stops in the village. These are unwritten rules. If there are temples in the caste village with closed walls, SCs cannot enter them. There are still a few villages where the SCs cannot pass through the caste Hindu streets wearing footwear. If a SC person is riding a cycle and another caste person happens to be walking along the road, in whichever direction, he must get down from the bicycle and wait for the other caste person to walk across, after wishing him and taking his approval to cross him, he may ride again, as a mark of respect. If the cycle rider rings his bell to warn of his coming he is considered haughty. If another caste person, even of a younger age passes through the street of an SC hamlet, all the SCs, irrespective of age, have to stand up, as a mark of respect. (The SC women also do the same for SC men). The village barber or washerman does not serve them as they are below his status and besides the other caste people will no longer use his services. This has resulted in the SCs appointing one of their own caste persons as their washerman and behave towards him and his family exactly as the caste Hindus do to their washerman! They consider the washer family slightly lower and do not intermarry or eat with them. But in most villages these days all the SC boys know to cut their hair and each family usually washes its own clothes, meaning the womenfolk do the job. The younger boys often patronize the washerman at the central village who will iron their clothes, if necessary. But in quite a few villages this is still not possible. The owners of tea shops, barber shops etc. also do not object if the customer is "reasonably dressed" like the students wearing shirt and trousers. There is of course no question of any SC daring to enter the house of another caste Hindu in most villages in our district, and I am sure the situation is not very different in most other parts of the country as well. In quite a few villages, SCs have never voted at all or only voted according to the wishes of the local bigwigs as they are dependent on them for their daily survival. Passage to most SC villages is only through the caste village which can be barred for erring members. Even the houses where the SC live and the burial grounds are often technically owned by people of other castes – it helps to keep them on tender hooks.

Much of the tension between SCs and Other Castes (OCs) has occurred on such issues – at eating places, tea shops, sitting on benches, not showing due respect by getting up, demanding their right to vote or inter-caste marriage often involving physical assault and abuse. Most of those who lead such struggles are those who are going to colleges or having some land, jobs (mostly government, railways, military) or some independent source of income. At times factions between the other castes or even within a caste help in assertion of their rights by SCs. Of late, a lot of tension has been generated in struggles to recover land assigned in the name of SCs or tamarind trees which ought to be assigned to the poor.

***Uma:** Naren did a small satyagraha at home! When we started living in the village, we found that while the non-dalit workers were freely allowed to enter inside the homes and eat in the kitchen, Dalits were invariably served food outside in leaves or in separate plates and glasses. Naren wanted this to be stopped. He wanted them to enter our house freely and eat in the kitchen just as the non-dalit workers did. My father-in-law, a freedom fighter in his younger days, however, chose to be conventional, although in principle he agreed with Naren. Be a Roman in Rome, he used to say. After a few days of discussions, Naren declared that he would not eat at the dining table with father-in-law, that he would eat on the floor in kitchen along with both Dalit and non-Dalit workers. And started doing so. When I was faced with the question of where I should eat, I naturally followed Naren. Father-in-law could not stop him. Nor did he want to give in to Naren. But Naren would still sit with him at the dining table in the dining room and wait till he finished his meal and then eat in the kitchen. This went on for a few years, till father-in-law died, after which of course the Dalits had free entry into our house and ate wherever it was convenient, sometimes in the kitchen, sometimes at the table, and sometimes outside under the pandal in the courtyard if there were too many people and there was not enough room inside.*

Despite their intense rivalries when a situation of SC versus OC develops, the upper caste members close ranks. There are several voluntary organizations like the Andhra Pradesh Dalit Mahasabha which had just come into existence, working among Dalits (SCs) in Chittoor district and all of them, including us, rallied together and campaigned against the practice of untouchability. The campaigns reached a peak during the Ambedkar Centenary celebrations in 1991, and we documented systematically the widespread variety of practices of untouchability with the help of co-operative district officials. We managed to control, if not put an end to such practices as separate tea glasses in tea shops and hotels in the main centre villages where we were working. Slowly such practices are being discontinued. Where the SCs have been well organized under some sangam or the other (mostly sponsored by NGOs) they have been able to exercise their vote somewhat freely and also stand up to the other caste people. Such clashes now a days result in filing of cases under SC, ST (Prevention of Atrocities) Act under which no bail can be granted to the accused, who in turn has to prove his/her

innocence. Moreover, the complainant when the case is registered will be paid some money by the Department of Social Welfare, and more if the case is actually proved. So the other castes (OCs) do not as readily beat or abuse the SCs as they used to earlier. But to counter this Act, the OCs also have a weapon – a case of attempt to rape is foisted on the SC, which is also equally powerful, as the accused has to prove his innocence and no bail is granted when the case is registered! Of course, it all depends upon how strongly or how well the rival parties are organized. A lot of hard bargaining goes on and usually some settlement is reached (an apology and/or some monetary consideration).

Change and adaptation

We were quite surprised at how quickly people adapt to the change. Even in villages where untouchability is severely practiced, a government official who happens to be a SC is treated with respect, especially if he is a police officer! Not so much the SC school teacher, so power begets respect! One finds the very same people who bitterly opposed or were hesitant to changing the practices of untouchability are nowadays chatting freely with SCs. In our house the cook is a Dalit from the local hamlet. What is surprising is how people (other caste persons) fairly quickly (within two to three years) adjusted to the new situation. They now not only eat in our house, food cooked by her but she also visits some of their houses. But most other SCs do not try and are not invited into the houses of OCs. But there are signs of growing leniency and adjustment though it would need several powerful social, political and economic campaigns before untouchability practices disappear altogether.

The caste system and the politics of numbers

Dalits constitute 18% of the population in the district (according to a voter survey conducted by the Telugu Desam Party). 60 to 70% of the Dalit households are primarily agricultural workers. The rest are partly marginal farmers doing odd jobs in towns like masonry work or in hotels or factories or government jobs (mostly teachers). The upper castes in our area are either Reddys (12%) or Naidus (6.4%) who mainly own the best cultivable lands in the area. Both of them belong to the Sudra Varna in the caste hierarchy. The Reddys were the traditionally dominant feudal community whose monopoly was shaken by the rise of the Telugu Desam with which the Kamma Naidus identify themselves. They are closely followed by the Balija community who although constituting 9.2% of the population but are not a dominant economic force, and have been struggling across the state for a BC (Backward Caste) status and adequate political representation. The other sizable community is that of Muslims (7.6%) who tend to concentrate in the small towns of the district. They are generally poor and live by doing petty business. Some of them have prospered in fruit business and other such

enterprises. They are present throughout the district and are generally perceived by other communities as just one more caste --- somewhat like the BCs and interestingly, their behaviour towards the SCs is more or less the same as that of other castes. In our campaigns against untouchability we often had to fight with Muslim tea stall owners for maintaining separate tea glasses for SCs.

Thanks to the politicization and democratization through elections, in bus transport, hotels, school and colleges, cinemas, things are moving; albeit slowly towards a more egalitarian inter caste relations. But it is clear from past experience with untouchability and apartheid that these practices do not simply wither away with development. Remember the practice of “bussing” in Southern USA where blacks had to sit in the rear seats of a bus; a practice in vogue till the early sixties, till Martin Luther King led the campaign, as well as our own experiences in putting an end to the practices of untouchability.

But one thing has become clear to us, through our stay in the village that while untouchability can be put to an end, caste will not go away. Caste is a reality of Indian society. It is the predominant social identity in villages. It gives a sense of security – with relatives, kith and kin, in times of need, for employment, sickness, death, marriage, etc. reinforced each time the community gathers for such occasions and functions. People may adjust to inter-caste marriages (except in case of marriages with SCs and Muslims), with the caste identity of the male predominating. It is now clear to me why caste has survived for over five thousand years and why it still continues to do so. Within the over all hierarchy each community has freedom of action to practice its beliefs and customs; and depending upon its control over resources and numbers, it comes to terms with the other communities regarding social status etc. Caste will not go. It cannot be wished away. It is an identity – a positive identity. The negative connotation comes with the SCs in their interaction with the other castes – trying to hide their caste for fear of distancing and insult. But now with the resurgence of the Madiga (leather worker) community proudly announcing their caste honorific with their names, things have started moving. Unfortunately for the Dalit movement it is no longer the ominous threat it appeared to be with the rise of the Dalit Mahasabha and organization of NGOs at the grass roots in Dalitwadās. A resurgence that appeared



possible once again with the rise of Kanshi Ram in U.P is now a lost dream. The mobilization of Madigas as a separate community wronged at the hands of Malas who are supposed to have cornered most of the benefits in the name of reservations (partly true) and the competing calls of the political parties have badly splintered the Dalits into several groups and the community lies dissipated feeling betrayed by its leadership.

The practice of untouchability sustaining down the years into the 21st century, is basically due to its function of reinforcement of relations of dominance and dependence. Unless these relationships are shaken to make people of different castes (who are mutually dependent) interact on a more equitable footing and make them reasonably independent of each other in economic terms, untouchability will not go. **Therefore economic reforms are a necessary condition of Dalit liberation but are not sufficient. By themselves economic reforms cannot change the relationships of the traditional caste culture. They have to go hand in hand with social reform campaigns for removal of untouchability – both by Dalit assertion campaigns a la Ambekdar and by caste Hindus campaigning among the farmers of other castes – a la Gandhi. Both are complementary. Both are needed however much the Ambedkarites might revile Gandhi and vice versa. In fact Ambedkar's conversion to Buddhism (and not Islam or Christianity) heralds the possible confluence of these two streams of struggle towards a new flowering, submerging untouchability in the annals of history.**

Today, there are no major social campaigns against untouchability at the village level nor is there any movement of significance demanding redistribution of economic resources, especially land, to Dalits. The National campaign for Dalit Human Rights has been fairly successful in making the voice of Dalits heard at the U.N. and the National level equating untouchability with apartheid. While its efforts at the international and national level are commendable it is sad to see the campaign at the local level against untouchability is hardly noticeable. It is a welcome sign that the Communist Party Marxist (CPM) of late has woken up (better late than never) to the evil practice of untouchability and has been launching campaigns against such practices for the last three years in the name of *Kula Vivakshata Vyatireka Porata Committee* i.e. struggle committee against caste discrimination. It may be noticed that the committee of the CPM is campaigning not for abolition of caste but only against caste discrimination, that is, they seem to have realized that the fight against caste and against caste discrimination are two different things.

From the point of view of other castes, Sharad Joshi, a noted farmers' leader, made an interesting observation. He said that when the farmer's economic status is improving he will not bother much about the practices of untouchability and caste hierarchy. It is only when the position of farmers is not improving or on the contrary is declining, while certain sections/ families of Dalits are improving, through jobs, lands etc. with the consequent

claims to equality by the latter that the other caste people tend to be very particular about maintaining their status. For, after all, it is only the social status (by birth) that is still left with them, having been deprived of any economic improvement and getting deeper and deeper into debt. And all the anger and frustration of their situation gets concentrated into focusing on the maintenance of practices of untouchability and caste discrimination. This situation is particularly noticeable in the case of many backward communities who are only a little above the SCs in caste hierarchy such as the Wadders (stone cutters), Yadavs, Ekira Dora, Balijas etc, as also among the poor or middle farmer Kammas and Reddys. A similar situation prevails between the Vanniar and the SCs in Tamil Nadu. We thus have a funny situation, with the big land owners, and rich urbanites professing caste liberalism and against the practice or at least willing to stop practicing untouchability, while the peasant insists on maintenance of untouchability and associated practices which would in turn reinforce his status and dominance in all spheres.

Interestingly, the removal of untouchability, although an important demand, is not at the top of the agenda of any of the Dalit political parties. They are more interested in forming caste alliances with other backward castes to oust the upper and middle castes from power – Bahujan Samaj theory. Capturing political power through the ballot with their numbers seems to be their strategy and once in power they expect social and economic justice to flow. They do not spell out any specific economic agenda for Dalit liberation unlike the communists who emphasize the economic liberation of Dalits as primary.

Land reforms for Dalits

Around 75% of the Dalits in the rural areas are agricultural workers. To any one observing their situation, it is quite clear that a little land with water supply will make a tremendous difference to these Dalit families, in terms of survival, standard of living and most importantly as a launching pad for improving their status and economic position. The freedom that even $\frac{1}{2}$ an acre of wet land can bestow on a family, the dignity it enjoins is to be seen to be believed. Despite all the theories about land fragmentation and their unproductive nature and therefore the need for land consolidation (although there is a lot of truth in this contention), it makes a lot of economic, social and political sense to ensure that each landless poor SC family across the country is in control of at least $\frac{1}{2}$ an acre of wet land. As P.S. Appu pointed out, distribution of ten cents of wet land to each Dalit family in Kerala and land distribution accompanied by other inputs had tremendous difference in the lives of Dalits in some areas of Bihar. Similar has been the experience in Andhra Pradesh wherever Dalits have gained control over some wet land.

The question is as to whether there is enough of such wet land to go around? Let us make a simple calculation. For the 1 crore Dalits meaning 20 lakh families, 14 lakhs would be living in villages (70%). Of them 75% are dependent on agriculture as workers i.e.

around 10.5 lakh families. Which means the Government would have to acquire around 6 lakh acres of wet land for redistribution to Dalit families across the state. Out of some 1 crore acres of wet land in the state is it too much to ask for just 6%? By extending the scheme to other agricultural worker families of other castes as well at a later stage, the government in power can easily do away with the subsidised rice scheme on which it is spending around Rs.1200 crores per annum. This would thus make good economic and political sense as well for any party or coalition in power. It is only the imagination and will that is lacking.

Table IV

Land Distribution: Performance of Different States -1996-97

States /Uts	Total Geographical Area (in Sq. Km)	Total Cultivable Area (in Acres)	Total Area Distributed (in Acres)	% of Cultivated Area	Ceiling Surplus Area Distributed (in Acres)	% of Cultivated Area
Andhra Pradesh	275045	39476640	5726880	14.51	571880	1.45
Assam	78438	8007920	4244878	53.00	479878	5.99
Bihar	173877	27778480	2222217	8.00	303217	1.09
Gujarat	196024	30533760	4147999	13.58	133999	0.43
Haryana	44212	9424000	180259	1.91	87259	0.93
Himachal Pradesh	55673	2055920	21340	1.04	3340	
Jammu& Kashmir	222236	2596560	450000	17.33	450000	17.33
Karnataka	191791	31977120	5334147	16.68	117147	0.37
Kerala	38863	6175200	1979283	32.05	64283	1.04
Madhya Pradesh	443446	56521680	524313	0.93	185313	0.33
Maharastra	307713	52117200	6281870	12.05	554870	1.06
Manipur	22327	406720	33682	8.28	1682	0.41
Orissa	155707	20080560	1517298	7.56	154298	0.77
Punjab	50362	10661520	265487	2.49	103487	0.97
Rajasthan	342239	63683920	781174	1.23	452174	0.71
Tamil Nadu	130058	20812160	1143369	5.49	162369	0.78
Tripura	10486	773760	133599	17.27	1599	0.21
Uttar Pradesh	2944111	51827040	3250501	6.27	390501	0.75
West Bengal	88752	14711360	1397293	9.50	965293	6.56
D & N Haveli	401	59520	101851		6851	11.51
Delhi	1483	178560	30394	17.02	394	0.22
Pondicherry	482	84320	1022	1.21	1022	1.21
Total	2901880	449943920	39768856	8.84	5190856	1.15

Notes: # Total Area Distributed = Ceiling Surplus Land Distributed + Government Waste Land Distributed + Bhoodan Land Distributed + Area accrued for Ownership rights to Tenants.

Source: Derived from Annual Report 1996-97, Government of India Ministry of Rural Areas and Employment., and Land Reforms Unit, LBSNAA, Mussorie.

Talking of political will, land reforms would have made a sea change in the lives of the down trodden and paved the way for making our country into a vibrant political and economic power. While Communist China has redistributed 42% of its agricultural land soon after liberation, in Capitalist Japan 32%, South Korea 33% and Taiwan 38% of land has been redistributed, while in India hardly 1.5 % has been redistributed! See Table IV for performance of different states in India on Land Reforms. Land reforms is today a forgotten agenda, with even the left political parties only paying a lip service while it is more or less missing from the election manifestoes of other parties; they are now talking in terms of lifting the ceiling laws.

The moot question is, is there enough land available for redistribution?

In surveys conducted in Chittoor district by the NIRD and the district administration separately, it has been found that

- Around 4 lakh acres have been assigned to the poor; out of this 40% of the land assigned in the name of the poor is in ineligible hands amounting to nearly 1,60,000 acres!
- Similarly, government claims that out of the nearly 16,000 acres of ceiling surplus lands, 10,000 acres have been distributed. But till today many of them do not even know that they have been given land! In several cases although pattas and pass books have been issued land has not been shown to them, i.e land has not been handed over to them. For example, in Sadumu Mandal, under survey no. 354-1, 201.87 acres have been distributed to 100 persons and pattas have been issued; but they have not been shown exactly where the land is! Most of it continues to be in the hands of the erstwhile landlords or sold to some others at throw away prices. A task force must be created to hand over these lands to the owners within one month.
- 14, 000 acres of land have been identified by voluntary organizations which are in possession of poor people, but have not been give pattas or legal titles. For example, 320 acres in Pedda Panjani Mandal, in Bommalakunta survey no. 387.
- Another 5000 acres involved in some 89 cases are doing several rounds of the courts and tribunals on some frivolous ground or the other for the last 25 years and no body seems greatly perturbed!
- About 12,000 acres of temple, mutt, Waqf board lands are illegally occupied by various local bigwigs and real estate brokers across the district. Some of the temples don't even exist any more. The lands are supposed to be leased out in public auction. Out of these many are caught up in court cases , and continue to be illegally occupied. For example, lands in the outskirts of Tirupati and Renigunta under the occupation of Tirumala Tirupati Devasthanams (TTD) and Hathiramji Mutt; 181 acres belonging to Kasi Vishvesvaraswamy temple in Battam Doddi village, Pedda Panjani Mandal.

- Thousands of acres are gobbled up by racketeers under sec.11A of the Estates Abolishment Act claiming falsely that they were cultivators and in possession of those lands way back in 1948. And there are several compliant revenue officials to prove that and accept such claims well into the 1980s! For example, in Puttur Mandal, 860 acres belonging to Kalyana Venkateswara temple; 1165 acres of Srotriyam lands under survey no. 276/11 in Pandur village, in Varadaiyapalem Mandal; 982 acres under Survey no. 22 adjacent to Vani Sugar factory in Lakkunta Mallupalle, Punganur Mandal.
- Similar is the fate of Bhoodan lands and tribal lands alienated to non-tribals.
- Lands under dispute between Revenue department and Forest Department amounting to 50,000 acres are spread through the district. Out of these details of 20,000 acres have been submitted by us to the government. Under the Girijan and other Forest Dwellers Act 2000, the lands in possession of poor until 2005, if proven, should be given titles. A joint survey team of Revenue and Forest departments must be constituted to solve this problem, and pattas should be given to the poor. Those lands already issued pattas by the Revenue Department should not be claimed by the Forest department. For example, 17 acres under Survey no.492 and 499, in Nelapatnam village, Somala Mandal; 817 acres of Bhoodan land under survey no. 6 in Devulakuppam, Avulapalle in Somala Mandal.
- Then, there are deforested forest lands, which can be handed over to the local poor for rejuvenation of the forests and enjoyment of the produce by the local poor through Vana Samrakshana Samithis. Over 5 lakh acres of such land exist in the Chittoor district alone and nearly one crore acres across the state, opening up a tremendous potential for employment generation and ecological sustenance. But unfortunately as things stand, most of the afforestation schemes have only served to line the pockets of the forest department officials and some local tout.
- Tamarind trees amounting to more than one lakh trees in poramboke lands must be numbered and tree pattas should be issued to the poor people.

So there is land, enough for every one's need but not for any one's greed, as Mahatma Gandhi would put it!

Realizing the importance of land reforms as revealed by the few surveys carried out and our own experience in the field, most of the NGOs working for Dalit empowerment in Chittoor district, as well as the mass organizations of the left parties, especially Communist Party of India and the Andhra Pradesh Dalit Mahasabha decided to work together in 1996. A body called, "Movement for Implementation of Land Reforms" (Bhoosamskarana Kaaryaacharana Udhyamam or BSKU) was formed with the sole

purpose of getting the various land reforms laws implemented, to assist the poor to take possession of the lands that ought to be in their possession even according to the existing legislation. This was a single point agenda and any one group/individual could be part of this effort irrespective of their other activities. The only rule was that political parties could not participate directly but only through their mass organizations, as otherwise the whole exercise could get easily branded as a front of some party or the other and the struggle as a show to build up strength for the party. I was made the Convener of this movement and till now we did succeed in getting about 12,000 acres of land into the possession of the poor. This was possible as a local organization of the poor existed in the form of a union and with the confidence that a district level association of unions was backing up the effort. We were helped a great deal by some progressive Collectors, Joint Collectors and Assistant Collectors (IAS Officials) who shared a lot of information on land issues with us. We had periodical reviews on the demands and issues we had put forth to them in our public rallies.

Uma: *The BSKU has had a three pronged strategy to carry on with their work.*

1. *To gather detailed information through NGOs/peoples organizations, supported by government records on specific cases, complete with survey numbers, in whose possession the land is at present, what is expected of the government, etc. The 40 odd organizations got active collecting the details and submitted a huge document to the Collector. They collected information under the following categories in their respective areas in the Chittoor district:*

- *Government Land in possession of poor people but has no legal title (patta).*
- *Assigned Land with patta but not in possession.*
- *Land under dispute between Revenue and Forest Depts.*
- *Ceiling surplus lands*
- *Estate/Inam lands in possession of ineligible persons*
- *Temple, Mutt, Waqf Lands*
- *Co-operative Joint Farming Societies(CJFS) Lands*
- *Bhoodan lands*
- *Others*
- *Tamarind trees in Government lands.*

When Mr. Narasingha Rao was the Collector, and Shri. Prema Chandra Reddy was the Joint Collector, they gave orders to place the entire district land records at the disposal of BSKU. This made their work somewhat easier. However specific details and reality check had to be done on the ground and Naren and his colleagues traveled a great deal to every corner of the district meeting the affected people and understanding the problems.

2. To submit formal petitions to the district government at all levels- Mandal Revenue Office (MRO), Revenue Division Office (RDO), and District Collector; taking specific cases for judgments and remedies. This is how Naren landed up at the Collectorate on every Monday with specific cases and the affected persons. Once he presented the cases to the Collector, he would follow up with their rulings/ instructions the rest of the time. (Monday is the day when the district officials are supposed to be present at the Collectorate compulsorily to meet people and solve their grievances. This practice, started, I think, by NTR, continues till today. It is a popular practice where hundreds of persons come to the Collectorate with their written applications, and meet the officials in the presence of the Collector and Joint Collector.) The Collectors and JCs were usually very cooperative, but the lower level officers were often not, procrastinating, delaying, dodging, etc. Therefore scores of visits had to be made to these offices. Almost every MRO knew Naren and his colleagues.
3. When the cases were not getting resolved, the BSKU would decide to enter the land forcibly and take possession – clear the bushes, plough and sow the land. The Andhra Pradesh Vyavasaya Vrtthidarula Union (AP Agricultural Workers Union or APVVU) had a tractor which was used for such purposes. The local people with tractors would not want to get entangled in such activities. The people on whose behalf such actions were undertaken were often afraid of violence, police, arrests, etc. but Naren would coax them with courage, would often put himself as the first respondent/accused, etc. “If you want to fight for justice, you should first learn to shed fear”, he would often say.

Several such actions were done in the last 15 years, for example, Moravapalle in Chandragiri mandal, Avulapalli in Somala mandal, Vidhyut Sadasivapuram in Puttur mandal, Pulicherla in Pulicherla mandal, etc. I will describe only one instance here (the land struggles in Chittoor district are a material for a separate book in itself; hope they would be put together soon).

In the words of Chennaiah of APVVU: “In the Pulicherla mandal the landlord family of late Shri B.V. Reddy owned about 584 acres. They are said to have come to this area about 70 years ago from the nearby Sadum area, cleared the forests with the help of local Dalits, and settled there. In 1983 they surrendered 119 odd acres to the government, declaring them as ceiling surplus. The same were distributed to 47 families with DKT (darkast) pattas, most of them workers with the landlord family. However, the landlord family continued to operate them, and paid the land revenue cess on them. Most of the beneficiaries on whose names the lands were registered did not even know that they were the owners! Out of 119 acres, 74 acres were under mango garden; the rest were crop lands or left fallow.

“Mr. Kranti kumar, a local Dalit youth joined APVVU as its field staff in the year 2001 to work in Pulicherla Mandal. As part of his work, he conducted a survey on the status of ceiling surplus lands and government assigned lands in his mandal. It was found that the

ceiling surplus lands belonging to BV Reddy family (hereafter BVR) were the largest, although there were other small land owners who had also encroached into government lands to a small extent. The BSKU decided to take it up at wider level, conducting padayatras and so on, because the local assignees of B.V. Reddy lands were afraid of Madhusudhan Reddy, the present BVR landlord. He was also the Mandal President, elected from the Telugu Desam Party which was ruling. In the year 2002 a padayatra was organized. Narendranath, as convener of BSKU invited all Dalit organizations and NGOs to take part. APVVU being local organization organized the padayatra programme. Despite the padayatra the people did not get courage to take up the land struggles because they were getting employment regularly in BVR farms. There was also a lot of migration happening due to acute drought for half a decade. However APVVU and BSKU were able to document the issues of land alienation as well as on tamarind trees, based on the padayatra. A team headed by Naren met the then district Joint Collector Shri Prem Chandra Reddy and presented the report.

“On the Joint Collector’s order the local Mandal Revenue Officer (MRO) Muddu Krishnaiah gave the detailed list of assignees for 119 acres of ceiling surplus land, along with the survey numbers. Mr. Kranthi being a very emotional person would have liked to have quick result but Naren insisted on a process oriented intervention, where the organizations from other parts of the district would also take part, so that the issue got highlighted and also others would get motivated. Repeated petitions and press releases, demonstrations and rallies on many important days like August 15th provided opportunities for the assignees to participate, albeit hiding their heads among other villagers in the crowd during the rallies! While all this was going on locally, the tensions were building up between Kranthi Kumar and the manager of the BVR farms, representing Madhu Sudhan Reddy. Repeated summons by Madhu Sudhan Reddy to Kranthi Kumar to visit him were ignored, as Kranthi used to get emotional and when he visited, the situation could lead to direct confrontation and attacks.

“It is in that tense situation for about one year that mediators approached Naren directly to resolve the issue. Naren with Gattappa, the District Secretary of APVVU visited the old lady, Mrs. Surendra Reddy (daughter- in- law of late B.V. Reddy, the landlord, founder of Nutrine Chocolates and BV Reddy Oil Mills) and explained the situation. Being old and depending on the family, she could not take firm decision to resolve the issue. Mr. Madhu Sudhan Reddy however got wild and encouraged Mr. Ramana, a Dalit Mandal Parishad Ward Member, elected from Telugu Desam Party (a supporter of BV Reddy family) to attack Kranthi. On 16th November, 2003 while Kranthi was waiting for a bus to come to Chittoor APVVU Office for a meeting, Mr. Ramana attacked Kranthi and hit him on head with stick. He collapsed with head injury. Since the attack took place right at the village he was immediately lifted to Piler hospital for treatment. A case was filed against Ramana and in

turn the landlord Madhu Sudhan Reddy influenced police to register a false case against Kranthi Kumar on attempt to rape, so that he would go for a compromise on the other case. This kind of strategy happens regularly in rural areas. This was used by the BSKU as an opportunity to organize a very big rally in front of police station in Kallur and the people blocked the Chittoor – Piler main road for two hours where the Circle Inspector of Pakala came down for negotiations. A compromise was effected, but the issue of land had not been resolved because the original assignees did not back up the struggle. This took another three years.

“In the meantime Naren and Chennaiah of APVVU went to Bangalore and met Smt. Anita Reddy, a daughter of the family, known for her liberal views, to persuade her family to give up the lands. However her efforts did not yield any results as her brother Madhu Sudhan Reddy politely rejected the appeal. Again the issue came back to square one.”

“In 2005, again the old lady was approached by Naren and he explained to her the serious consequences of delaying the land distribution. By this time the local Dalits had also gained the confidence due to local struggles and their leaders also approached the old lady as well as visited the District Collector. On 15th August, 2005 on the eve of Independence Day 300 Dalits around the area were motivated to enter and take possession over the lands, located opposite to Mandal Revenue Office, which got the attention of revenue officials. The BV Reddy family also recognised the danger of loosing other lands. It is in this context after several rounds of negotiations by Naren along with Union leaders, the then District Collector Mr. Rawath finally intervened in the issue and provided the pattas or land titles along with pattadhar pass books. Despite his direct intervention it took almost six months to demarcate the lands and show them to the original assignees, so that they could start farming. Today all the beneficiaries are cultivating the lands and harvesting the mango’s every year.”

“Land issues cannot be resolved by one attempt or by any one good officer. It means continuous efforts over long periods of time, in this case 6 years. People have to be continuously engaged, united to put up resistance to get the attention of the media / and also the officials. Generally people loose interest in between, as there is no committed leadership demonstrating sincerity and commitment. The untiring efforts of Naren in pursuing the case provided confidence for the people to stand united and face all the struggles.”

It is well known land reforms bring a great deal of change for the better in the life of the beneficiaries. For instance, one of the beneficiaries who got 2 acres allotted to him with some mango trees, has harvested mango for three seasons now, planted another 100 mango saplings under the NREG scheme which supports him for another three years for watering, fencing, etc. He has taken a loan of Rs. 20, 000 from the bank for land improvement; his

sons are going to school. He is hopeful that his lot would improve even more in about seven years when the mango trees would start yielding. He was smiling when he narrated their struggle experience to Karnam Murali when he interviewed him. Naren too would be smiling!

The serious involvement of the top officials in the district did make the local revenue officials from the Mandal Revenue Officer to the Village Accounts Officer squirm a little in their seats. When the senior officer beckons, they are at their colonial best serving their senior masters full of “yes sir” and “no sir.” Definite deadlines are fixed and sometimes even reviewed. But very little actually moves! There is always some good excuse. Of late, they are full of campaigns and programmes ordered from Hyderabad by the Honourable Chief Minister, like Janma Bhoomi, Neeru-Meeru (Water and You), clean and green, micro level planning etc. By the time they finish running around under one programme the Chief Minister is ready with another programme with immediate collection of data and reviews...the breakneck speed for a machinery not used to moving around has resulted in gross fudging of figures and routine administration turning to a stand still.

The revenue officials are so busy they simply don't seem to have the time to attend to our land issues. In the meantime, the top revenue officials are frequently transferred and one has to begin all over again. The lower level revenue officials know this game. The most powerful official in the revenue department is not the District Collector but the Village Accounts Officer. He is the main mischief maker. He is a powerful man. He can produce any record, change any record. And the courts are always ready to oblige with a “stay” which can then drag on for years endlessly from one court to another and generations will pass – no law will be implemented, no justice will be done. For those poor who take the law seriously, to get the land reform laws implemented would mean spending lakhs of rupees (not just thousands) and running behind those fleecing lawyers and lethargic courts. This is no way to get justice.

We had submitted a list of issues involving some 40,000 acres to the government. While some issues in which there was no strong adversary were solved by the administration, most of the rest remain unresolved. A strong and vibrant people's movement is the only answer. But those who should be organizing it seem to want to run away from the responsibility! It is much easier to work on issues which do not involve conflicting class interests. Especially for funded NGOs this is a major problem. The thin cadre of the political parties have to double or triple as spokespersons for so many of their front organizations that they have little time to spare for such activities and are unable to do much especially in terms of follow up action. The non-parliamentary left, meaning various Marxist / Leninist groups are non-existent in our area. But even if they enter, as it happened in the past in the eastern taluks, the main issues are side-tracked by their

murder politics into law and order problems inviting severe repression against even the smallest of activities. So where does one go from here?

To be or not to be, that is the question.
Whether it is nobler in the mind to suffer
The stings and sorrows of outrageous future
Or to take arms against a sea of troubles
.....
Thus conscience does make cowards of us all;
And thus the native hew of revolution
Is sicklied over with the pale cast of thought
And enterprises of great pith and movement
With this regard, their currents turn away
And lose the name of action. (Shakespeare, **Hamlet**)

A New Agenda for Land reforms

Learning from our history, of failures and successes, of gains and losses the challenge is to think creatively and evolve a program of action that will be both meaningful and effective in this round of land reforms:

1. Right to information

The land records in the villages are in a big mess. In many areas a comprehensive land survey was done some 70 odd years ago. Although land records are public documents they are rarely revealed to the public. The people have a right to know the extent of land in the village, the varieties of lands, in whose names the lands have been recorded, who is shown as the cultivator, what are the waste lands, grazing lands, village “porombokes” and lands reserved as forests etc. All this data can be computerised and put on line, including the Field measurement books (FMBs) with sketches of the fields and the village map. Any one should be able to access them for the asking. A nominal fee for photostating cost could be recovered from those who want copies of the records. The records should also indicate any change in names of the owners / cultivators if any, yearwise. Old records should also be preserved to avoid tampering in the name of computerisation.

Further, the village map should be painted on the wall of the Panchayat office depicting the different types of lands in different colors and indicating the survey numbers of the various lands.

Peoples' organizations will have to fight for this right to information by mobilising the rural poor. With the help of these records, enquiries must be carried out in the villages to verify the factual position. Data collected village wise must be collated and consolidated into a district level report and the district level reports consolidated into a state level status report which can also be presented to the Government to demand land redistribution. This whole exercise of verification of land records can be completed within a year's time if all the mass organizations in the districts co-operate..

2. Titles to lands in possession of the poor: Due to their inability to pay bribes or due to some technical irregularity many lands in possession of the poor, being cultivated for generations are without title preventing them from availing credit facilities and other benefits. Where such lands happen to be part of reserve forests the Government could surrender other revenue lands in its possession to the forest department in lieu of these lands or alternately, the poor in possession of these lands could be given a larger extent of degraded forest land near by to be protected and preserved by them as a condition for granting titles to the lands under their occupation and enjoyment.

3. All degraded forest lands should be distributed to the local poor for regeneration of forests and enjoyment of the produce by them. This requires a lot of homework on the part of the government, forest dept. as well as the mass organizations leading the people...for everyone to understand that forests mean gainful employment for the poor, free availability of several natural resources like fodder, firewood and minor forest produce and boosting of water availability in the area. World Bank money is not required for such efforts.

4. Government lands and assigned lands under litigation in various courts for years **should be distributed** forth with to the poor by giving the courts an **undertaking** that the same is being done under public interest and that the **government is willing to pay** the market value to the claimants **if in the final appeal** the **petitioners** against the government **win** the case. Suitable legislation may be passed if necessary.

5. Demand for a comprehensive survey of all lands:

Land records in most states are in a big mess. With modern instruments such as GPS it has become tremendously cheap and quick to carry out a survey. This will avoid much litigation and mischief by the local revenue officials. This data should be made freely accessible to the people.

6. At this historical juncture, with the left parties at the Centre in an influential position, it is necessary to bring all mass organizations interested in distribution of land to the poor on one platform from the village to the state level to the extent possible on this single point agenda: of land to the tiller and make it a reality through a series of mass campaigns: seeking information, educating, organizing and occupying; peacefully, truthfully and determinedly exercising our rights.

Tell me, Where is my Land? Please show me my land?

The BSKU (land rights movement) in Chittoor district has a signature song, which is sung with appropriate dance movement. It is in the form of a conversation between a woman and a man.

Woman : Uncle, the government distributed some land to us recently and gave us pattas (title deed papers). I want to know where my land is. How do I go about it?

Man : Oh, it is very simple, you go to the Sarpanch and he will tell you.

Woman : So I went with the patta papers to the Sarpanch. He saw the patta papers and laughed loudly, "such a land is not there in our panchayat at all!" he said.

Tell me, Where is my Land? Please show me my land?

Woman : Uncle, as you advised I took the papers to the Sarpanch and he said there is no such land in the whole of our panchayat! Uncle, what should I do now? I so very much want to get my land.

Man : Oh, is it? Then you should go to the MRO, the man who sits like a king in the Mandal office.

Woman : So I went to the MRO. He saw the patta papers, called the RI (Revenue Inspector), and turned the file. Then he called the guard and asked him to throw me out!

Tell me, Where is my Land? Please show me my land?

Woman : Uncle, now what should I do uncle, I went to the MRO and he threw me out.

Man : Oh, did he do that? Then you better go to the Collector who sits in Chittoor.

Woman : So I did go to the Collector and showed him my patta papers. He called the RDO (Revenue Division Officer), saw the paper and turned the file, and said, "I am afraid the land in your patta does not exist in the whole of our district!"

Oh, Tell me where is my Land? Please show me my land?

Woman : Now what should I do? Surely the government won't tell lies!

Man : Don't lose heart! Go straight to Hyderabad and meet the CM, the man who smiles and wears a red turban in the hoardings, he is the one who gave you all the pattas, isn't it, go meet him, your job will be done!

Woman : So I went to Hyderabad and met the CM. He saw the patta, pressed the computer buttons, turned the file and said, after a long time, "Go keep these papers safely in a box." Uncle, what does he mean by that?

Oh, Please Tell me, where is my Land? Please show me my land?

Man : What he means is when you have kids, and your kids have kids, the land will still be yours, which is why he has asked you to keep it safely.

Woman : Uncle, I have had enough, listening to you I have gone around all the offices. Now I have decided to make a sangam of all the people like me. Oh, my worker-brothers-sisters, come let us organize, let us make sangam, let us see to the end of this matter.

This is a sangam of the workers; this is a sangam of the hungry

This is a sangam of the poor, but this is a sangam worth its name!

Oh, my worker-brothers-sisters, come let us organize, let us make the sangam!



CHAPTER 4

Dying Culture - The Artisans

Weavers are supposed to be the second largest category of workers after agriculture workers. In our area they are concentrated in the eastern taluks of the district—near Puttur, Srikalahasti, Nagari and Narayanavanam. Their basic problem is of getting quality yarn at reasonable rates and a remunerative price for their products. Although many commissions and expert committees have recommended these measures in the past and several legislations made for production of hank yarn and supply to the weavers, and several products reserved exclusively for the handloom sector, these are honoured more in the breach and a situation has come where the power looms have almost completely taken over and even pass off their products as handloom; very few of power loom owners are weavers.

Of late, in keeping with the growing trend, the Sathyam Committee even recommended removal of all reservations/restrictions on master weavers. In favor of handlooms there are also many bogus societies, which are gobbling up the subsidies being provided by the State Government without a meter of cloth being produced. (All the cloth produced is in the form of bills and vouchers). With the working classes having switched over to polyester for their daily wear, cotton weavers have been put to great distress. The silk weavers however are able to manage somehow (they prefer imported Chinese silk yarn). Many weavers in our area have given up their traditional occupation and in some areas have even started committing suicides – so much for planning and liberalization. The linkage between cotton growing farmers (now drowned in a highly volatile situation of debts, pesticides and chemical fertilizers and gambling with bore wells and the market) – and people who do carding, ginning, spinning, weaving, and merchants -- has been broken long ago with the advent of British. And surprisingly even after so much of Gandhian campaigning, no machines have been devised, which can reestablish these linkages to supply quality yarn to the weavers directly from the farmers. (The team of Uzamma, Kannan and Ramakrishna and others in Chennai is making some serious efforts in this direction and have succeeded to a significant extent.) The weavers have not been able to organize themselves effectively even at district level; as Gandhiji realised, their success also depends upon consumer consciousness. A via media has to be found between a humanistic-patriotic- environment-friendly fervor to

save/sustain the khadi/handloom weaver and cater to the changing consumer tastes vis-à-vis other products – polyester etc.

The potters' days were numbered long ago with the advent of aluminum and steel, and of late, plastic. They will not disappear altogether as there will always be demand for a few mud pots for drinking, storing, for ceremonies. In any case most of them double as farmers or do other things as well. There is a potters' hamlet near our village and they are managing to survive; thanks to the creative thrust of an artist residing at Rishi valley school near Madanapalle, quite a significant number of potters in Madanapalle division have taken to producing beautiful artifacts like decorative vases to cater to the urban market and are doing fairly well.

The bamboo workers are finding it hard these days. Most of them in our area survive on producing mango baskets for local merchants and flowers, and grape baskets for the Bangalore market. Of late, cardboard boxes and plastic cartons are taking over. While a bamboo basket costs Rs.6.50, and can carry around 7 kgs, a card board box costing Rs.10/- can carry 10 kgs of mangoes, involving less labour for packing. The weavers informed me that the demand for mango baskets has come down drastically within the last two years from one lakh baskets a year to around 30,000. Earlier they (with some assistance from us) had formed a co-operative society with great difficulty. Difficulty because it was a very expensive affair. I did not believe them when they said it costs around Rs.15,000/- to Rs.20,000/- to form a co-operative. When we actually got into the effort I realised they were right. There is so much corruption in the government and one has to make so many trips to many places including a couple of visits to Hyderabad and everyone demands a cut. While 50% of the expenses involved are accounted for the share value etc., the rest is required for meeting these expenses.

Without the cooperative they would be harassed, once a month at least, by the forest officials seizing their produce saying it was being produced from bamboo cut without a permit (either from the forests or the local farmers - both need a permit). The forest officials used to fleece them regularly. After the formation of the Co-operative they have a license now and get bamboo from far away Giddalur – nearly 300 kms. Even that bamboo is getting to be scarce and the forest officials adjust to maamools – less expensive. The bamboo workers still get some bamboo supplied by tribals from the nearby degraded forests as well as local farmers.

Within the community of bamboo workers are a handful of the more intelligent and artful who dominate the scene. It is they, like the master weavers, who mobilize the capital for purchasing bamboo and supply to the rest of the workers and also market the produce, and take all the cream – or whatever little surplus that comes. It was they who moved with us to get the co-operative society formed. The rest of the workers barely sustain themselves with all the family labour thrown in. Most of the men are into

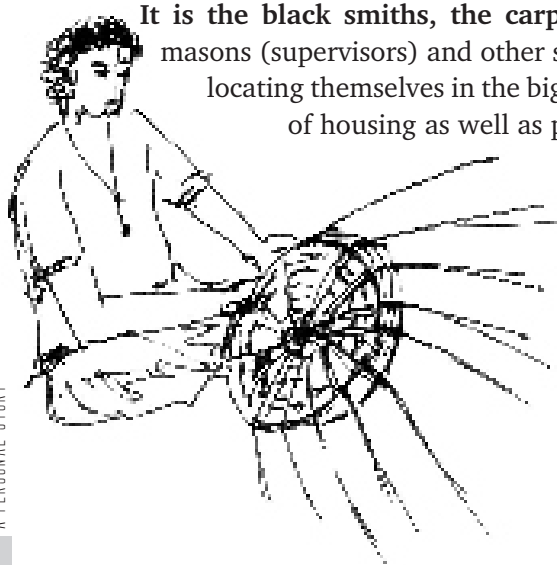
drinking. This seems to be the case everywhere: the intelligent, enterprising, strong always tend to exploit/dominate the rest and the rest are willing to subjugate themselves – why?

It is the black smiths, the carpenters and construction workers especially the masons (supervisors) and other skilled among them who are doing reasonably well, locating themselves in the bigger villages thanks to the Government programmes of housing as well as people's preference for cement – “pukka” buildings.

Despite all the talk of alternative, cheaper materials (20 to 30% less), when it comes to building one's own place, people feel it is an investment of a life time, why take the risk? The blacksmiths are always in demand both for house work and for farm implements. Of late, one must add the electric motor mechanics - they are also in great demand for repairs to the electric motors of various kinds. In fact, most farmers are themselves half electricians and half mechanics.

The various service castes like **barbers and washer men** also tend to migrate to the towns or nearby main (central) villages where they set up shop unlike the old times when they used to visit house to house and were fed and given a share of produce. Now everything is monetised, and more centralised. The equation is also reversed. Instead of the servicemen/women visiting the customers at their residence, the customer visits the serviceman, although an old barber or a washerman of the earlier generation still do the rounds, though they are highly irregular.

Uma: We did try to promote the use of home/locally made goods, on the principle of swadeshi. We made tooth powder, soap at home, we used pottery for cooking, wore khadi and handlooms, took Ayurvedic/homeopathic medicines, tried to avoid plastics, tried to use products made by local/Indian companies and avoid multi-nationals, etc. But there were often no takers; and due to lack of availability/ convenience, we too compromised. When LPG process came into full swing, we couldn't even keep track of where the Indian stopped and multi-national began. And now everything seems to come from China. I was truly surprised when I found pencils sold in our village shop on which was written, Made in China!



CHAPTER 5

*Between Global and Local:
An ahimsa arrow from Venkatramapuram
into the heart of Washington*

Yaksha: "What is the Greatest Wonder?"

Yudhishtara: "Day after day and hour after hour, people die and corpses are carried along, yet the onlookers never realize that they are also to die one day, but think they will live for ever. This is the greatest wonder in the world."

(Mahabharata)

"The white too shall pass, perhaps sooner than all other tribes. Contaminate your bed and you will one night suffocate in your own waste" (Chief Seattle: We are part of the Earth).

"A person of courage today is a person of peace. The courage we need is to refuse authority and to accept only personally responsible decisions. Like war, growth at any cost is an outmoded and discredited concept. It is our lives which are being laid to waste. What is worse, it is our children's world, which is being destroyed. It is therefore our only possible decision to withhold all support for destructive systems and to cease to invest our lives in our own annihilation." (Bill Mollison : Permaculture).

Heads you lose, Tails I win

It seems such a rational thing to do: to reorganize our resources, to redistribute and coordinate our activities so that every one of us has plenty to eat, to shelter and entertainment and be happy. So much sharing and beyond is possible at so little cost, and yet there is fear. There is so much concentration of wealth, arms and ammunition. And now the capitalist engine is devouring the world with redoubled energy after the collapse of the dream of the USSR, with no holds barred, no frontiers of states to block them, in the name of free trade and globalization, under the garb of the WTO, the World Bank, the IMF and such wisecracks, whose wise prescriptions somehow seem to suit the multinational corporations of the West the best!

The Developed countries and their masters, the multinational corporations are closing in for the kill. Not satisfied (can they ever be satisfied?) with their 20% (declining) population controlling 80% of the World's resources, they now want to control

whatever is left in the name of liberalization, globalization and privatization. It is in this wider context of Pax Americana that we have to try and understand the twists and turns of various contradictions in our society. Our planners and politicians of all major political parties, irrespective of their hues, sometimes pretending to be original, are merely singing the song of LPG, at times tuned a little different. The corporatization of agriculture, the unequal and one sided conditional ties of WTO (why can't our labour be allowed to go anywhere in the world?), the World Bank loans, the golden hand shakes, the government determined to sell even profit making public sector undertakings are all part of the same scenario. Is there no freedom from all this?

Look at the USA. It has 70,000 nuclear weapons- that is, weapon-power to destroy the world 27 times! 43% of world trade in weapons is from USA. In spite of this it is nervous and shivering after 9/11/2001; it is afraid of its own shadow! It has started treating Muslims as its enemies and with "help" from "friends" like the oil industry (with friends like them you don't need enemies) greedy for the profits from oil of the Middle East, it is getting trapped into a whirlpool of its own militaristic politics in Iraq, Iran and Afghanistan. It is not able to produce its needs cheaply, with China and India producing them at one tenth of the cost. Its debts are astronomical, but because of investors' confidence in dollar currency, a legacy of the past, the show is going on, in spite of collapse of banks in USA and world wide recession. But this is a very precarious existence and the tables may turn any time. It is not easy for even Obama to tackle the situation.

America has also been responsible for global warming and climate change but still refusing to agree to cuts in emissions to any significant measure. Instead it keeps pressurizing emerging economies like China and India to do so, which provokes in turn a reactionary response from them, and the situation is left to worsen in these squabbles. Leaders in our country think we have to tread the same road of "development" as USA and Europe, and other "successful" countries like Japan, Korea, and others. Sooner we realize that this is a wrong road, that there is a dead end to this road, sooner we get off this road the better it will be for us, for our people, for our planet. For if this development model is bad for the USA, it is ten times worse for us, our population being four times that of USA, squeezed in one third of the area of USA. It is but common sense that USA can not be our model, but as they say, common sense is anything but common!

The other problem is population. While it has increased globally, many countries, in trying to minimize population increase, has got into another problem –of increase in old people and decrease in young people. For various reasons India still has a youthful population and we can supply labour for these countries, but they are reluctant to import labour, and the experiences have also not been happy, as for example in Australia. Only humane, caring governments can make the world a better place to live in. As the famous Telugu poet, Gurzada Appa Rao sang, we have to realize, "a country is not soil, but its people."

Nature and Human Nature

Perhaps, it is human nature to try to relax – as much as possible. To work less and rest more – if possible. We continuously develop/improvise technologies towards that end. It is probably also at the back of the drive to acquire – to become rich – resulting in exactly the opposite activity - work! So that some day, I or my progeny, may rest and be happier.... So is perhaps the drive to look for short cuts – to get rich quickly, to cheat, oppress and exploit. Concentration of power in one's hands, however, seems to have a drive of its own. Power is enjoyed for what it is. The stronger, physical or mental, enjoy the power of riding over the weak and meek. So is it in Nature, among the billions and billions of experiments in life going on simultaneously at various levels, only the fittest survive. Amongst the monkeys (closest to us) it is the strongest male who corners most of the females and bosses around. But as human beings, we are more conscious than other beings and capable of greater compassion – of giving and loving as much as of oppression, violence, anger and cruelty.

In Nature there is always a “balance.” The attempts to grow high yielding, short duration varieties of crops have their costs –they need heavy doses of chemical fertilizers for quick absorption and pesticides (organic/inorganic) to help overcome their greater susceptibility to pest, fungal and viral attacks. Every credit has to have a debit somewhere. Some one's gain is somebody's loss! The “harmony” in Nature is in the eye of the beholder! The harmony can be at various ‘levels’. Violence and rule of the powerful over the weak is as much part of nature as are peaceful co-existence of a variety of plants, animals and insects and birds, the seasons, the sun and the moon, and remember, the earthquakes, the cyclones and bursting volcanoes (certainly, they are not induced by man) are all part of Nature's ‘harmony.’

Insignificance of being

Reality is much, much more complex than we realize or can fathom. But that does not, of course, stop me from trying. And in the end it is so much simpler to ask: “who am I?” and “what do I want?” Sages down the ages, across the globe have pondered over this question and in each and every society (from tribal to big urban civilizations) they have attempted to answer this question. At one level, they more or less seem to be saying the same thing – being is a search for happiness/fulfillment. The more you give, the more you feel fulfilled, “love thy neighbours as thyself.” And as there are always moments of happiness and sadness in life, do your “duty” (?) without attachment – as both happiness and sadness, pleasure and pain, are temporary, they come and go – be in it and yet outside it...Farmers know this best. Every year, year after year, every season, every crop the farmer faces this, one missed rain can make all the difference, between a bountiful crop and almost nothing. All his effort of the entire season is gone in a whisker of a missed rain or a cyclone.

Farming makes you realize your insignificance before Nature, and before the collective, for, we need people to do farming. The less number of people one employs, the greater is the dependence on machines and outside technologies. But this also depends a lot on the kind of crops one grows. And both in terms of technology and the crops one grows, the tendency is to try and depend less on others – to minimize labour. But this is increasing our dependence on non-renewable energies like diesel and electric power harvested from coal and gas (or worse nuclear).

Need and Greed

There is so much of food and so much of everything we need produced in the world, enough for everybody and more; and yet people are made to or allowed to starve and die, suffer in diseases without care, children going blind for want of adequate food. The divide between the first and third worlds, the North and the South, the sharp divide between the rich and the poor in each country, the concentration of wealth and all that goes with it, the filth and poverty of the rest, the rapid pollution of the earth, its water, air and disappearing forests, rapidly exhausting all non-renewable resources and dumping plastic, not easily degradable stuff, all over. Can't we do something about it? How can we keep quiet? And for how long?

Global and Local

I don't know if we can change all this. Whether it is even worth fighting against. May be this is how human societies have always been down the ages and that is how they will be – technologies may differ, the world may have become smaller, but people's behavior is the same.... That is why the Mahabharata continues to enjoy so much popularity, the story told and retold....

But this much is clear to me: the present situation disturbs me a lot and trying to change things, even my small efforts, give me peace and joy. When I tend to sit back and relax too much, I feel restless and uncomfortable. I shall therefore continue my experiments in organic farming, campaign for equitable distribution of resources (i.e. organizing farmers, agricultural workers for lands etc), and be part of campaigns for justice.

People are suffering. There are so many burning issues all around. The class-caste divide, the urban-rural, agriculture versus industry, traditional versus modern, Western versus Indian, ecology versus development, collective versus individual, consumerism versus limiting wants, the list can go on... the farmers know they are being exploited and yet they can't get themselves to put up a united fight for a better price for their produce, can't co-ordinate and regulate production. The Dalits are more divided than ever and do precious little to get rid of the scourge of untouchability blatantly practiced

in the villages and covertly in the towns and cities. We are unable to get the agricultural workers to fight militantly for land reforms.

There are no dilemmas in understanding who is squeezing whom? And at whose cost? The dilemmas relate to us. To us and our elites surrendering so rapidly and trying to be more loyal than the king. And why? Why are people like us, who feel its all wrong – individuals, groups, organizations, why are we unable to put our act together? Are we to remain mere shouting brigades while the LPG caravan moves on? Why are people not responding or responding only sectorally, or momentarily as fire fighters?

Leaders as Lambs

The fault is not of the suffering people, but ours, those who could help them, stand by them, lead them, we are unable to inspire confidence in them, partly because we failed in the past at great cost. But a major portion of our failure to inspire faith in the suffering people, in themselves, through us, is partly due to our own inhibitions. In my opinion, the more we internalize our beliefs and externalize our practices – so that there is a harmony between what we believe, what we speak and what we do – greater will be the energy generated from within. That energy – call it spiritual, whatever – will then have the force to energise others. That is the force that Mahatma Gandhi acquired through his constant tapasya with truth and non-violence, his experiments with himself – of trying to practice what he believed (rightly or wrongly). The energy it generated electrified people around, energised them into action for truth and justice. Forget Gandhiji, this is true of any leader of some repute, doggedly pursuing his/her ideals – Ambedkar, the sufi saints, the leaders of the Bhakti movement, Lohia, Lenin, Trotsky, Mao, the many Marxist leaders who have given up so much, even the not so good guys like Hitler, Mussolini, Churchill.

People on the other hand, crave for “saviours,” that crystalising force which will energise them, to swell up in confidence and stand up for justice. That makes me sometimes wonder, they seem to be looking for the sacrificial bakra (lamb) who is well fed, respected and on the D day is bathed, decorated with flowers and vermilion and other marks and taken round the temple in a procession, with drums and music and what not, people shouting slogans praising the god (or Goddess), showering flowers, garlands on the sacred lamb only to be butchered at the altar of the deity... for the good of all. There will be lot of praise for the “leader” (read bakra) and after he/she has done his/her bit fighting for justice etc. the leader may enter the folklore and perhaps even history books. These leaders, the messiahs and reformers are the bakras – the sacrificial lambs of societies, they give their all and even if they don’t give, people demand – praise them and take over, each and every second of their time if possible.. such is their need! The more you give, the more they want! But that’s what compassion is all about!(?) only to the extent that you give... is the door open.

It is time (high time) that leaders, (people like Medha Patkar, Bojja Tarakam, B.D.Sharma, Vandana Shiva, Madhu Kishwar, Aruna Roy, Thomas Kocheri, SP Shukla, and the likes ... there are so many dedicated souls, giving up so much, achieving so much, despite their failings and weaknesses) come together. It is time to sink our egos and get on with the work, to go beyond our territories, to energize people, to instill confidence in themselves and strive for an alternative future(s)... to speak a new language of politics – to sanitize it the way Gandhi, Jaya Prakash Narain did... (Long live the 'Bakras'!).

As for me, while simplifying my needs and fulfilling them with locally produced things, I made three activities as my mission:

1. Chalo Venkatramapuram....I went back to my village, tried to do organic farming, mobilize the farmers to fight for justice, to work for forest and water resources development, to mobilize the society to discard wrongful practices.
2. To work for land reforms at the district and state level ...to mobilize agricultural workers to fight for a piece of land of their own.
3. To work with the Human Rights Forum, particularly on the issue of displacement.

While doing all these activities I have met and worked with various persons, from different walks of life, extraordinary people, from whom I have learnt much and to whom I salute.

Uma: Naren's ideas about social work evolved through the years. When he joined Lokayan, he saw the contradiction of talking about indigenous development with the support of foreign funds (Lokayan was supported by foreign funds at that time). With Vijay Pratap and Suresh Sharma, he spared no effort to wean the project off foreign funding. For himself, Naren wanted to carve out a different model, a kind of Gandhian swadeshi-swaraj model. In fact it was four legged stool standing on Gandhi, Ambedkar, Marxism and the environment movement. For inspiration he had Jesus, Buddha and the Bhagavad Gita. He felt everybody can and should do some public work, apart from caring for themselves and their own families, depending upon their own capacities and inclinations; it could be on a very small scale, say, within one's own hamlet/panchayat; it could also be on an international scale. He also felt there were enough resources even in the poorest communities in India; it is just that they were not inspired and willing to spare them for public work. Government funding and NGO funding encouraged this tendency. He often cited the example that even poor Dalits save and spend from Rs.2000 to 5000 to go to Sabari Mala temple or to some other pilgrimages/sight seeing tours. They regularly see cinemas but they would not spare even ten rupees for a public cause. This is because the leaders had little credibility.

He also decided to restrict his work within the district and the panchayat. He felt too much traveling outside the district did not help the movements on the ground. So he went outside of the district reluctantly, only when he felt his presence was necessary. Needless to say he had an active interest in what is going on in the outside world, he actively associated at the

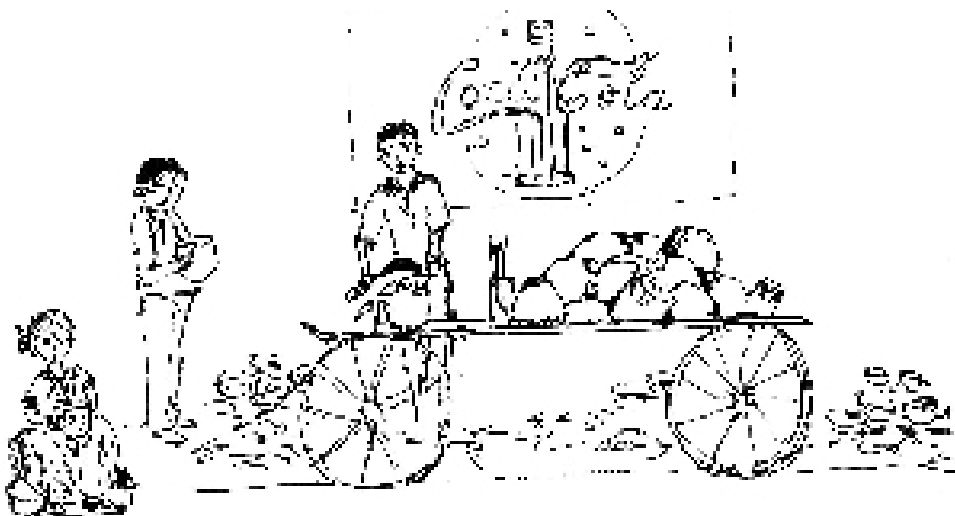
state level with the Andhra Pradesh Civil Liberties Committee and later with the Human Rights Forum, and at the national level with the National Alliance for Peoples Movements. He read as much material as he could. We subscribed to Economic and Political Weekly, Manushi, Down to Earth, agricultural magazines in Telugu. Other journals came to us sometimes as complimentary copies, sometimes we paid for them- PUCL bulletins, NAPM bulletins, Janata, Olympus, Lokayan bulletin, Human Rights Forum bulletins, etc., etc. He not only read them but often carried copies to sell them.

Truth Shall Prevail

Our rulers will not see the suicides of farmers because they don't want to. They will not hear the cries of children dying of brain fever nor feel the pain of unemployment and growing debts because they don't want to. They want the freedom, for a pittance, to peacefully plunder and exploit. The army and police and the courts will stand guard.

"The fault is not in our stars but ourselves that we are such underlings." No matter how much they may tempt through their advertisements of film stars and crickets, I refuse to drink their Coca Cola or Pepsi. Therein lay our strength. Like the miniscule malarial parasite we can bring these mighty multinational corporations down to their knees, to a state of sweat and shivering, if only we let our little big egos deflate, break the barriers of ideologies, distancing from power and pelf, help build movements of agitation and construction, thinking globally and acting locally. We can definitely drive these paper tigers away, towards a new (ancient) ethos of compassionate living.

No matter what they may say or do, if we go forward with compassion, if we keep truth and justice as our weapons, there is no problem that can not be solved. The challenge is to follow the road of truth, justice and compassion. Mistakes keep happening, there is no need to be afraid of them; we need not feel helpless; it is more important to learn from our mistakes. This is what farming teaches us. Mother Nature keeps giving us opportunity, again and again!



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Truly Extraordinary

K. Balagopal

(Published in Andhra Jyothy newspaper, 7 July 2009.

Translated from Telugu by Kiran Vissa)

Gandhians thought he was a communist. Communists thought he was a Gandhian. As for Narendranath, he used to work on both platforms without any problem. He would fit into any forum that worked for the good of the people; he would fit in and work. That didn't mean he refrained from expressing his opinions. In fact, in each group that he worked with, he would often bring in a different perspective, and raise issues and questions which wouldn't otherwise come up. He would ask Gandhians about class exploitation. He would question Communists about violence and lack of democracy. Those who raise these questions from the outside are many. But Naren used to work with both groups and raise these questions in their own forums.

This approach was not a clever strategy from Naren; it was simply integral to the person that he was. He wholeheartedly liked anyone who worked for the common good. He collaborated with Medha Patkar who worked to adopt Gandhian approach in mass movements. He also admired communist Kolla Venkaiah and worked with him for the implementation of land reforms.

Naren was not short on his own opinions and ideas. But he didn't have an iota of dogmatism. For instance, he believed that violence committed by anyone for any reason was wrong. Yet when it came to civil liberties organizations which refused to condemn violent people's movements, he continued to work with them proactively. When Human Rights Forum was formed and took a stand that they will condemn unjust use of violence by naxalite groups, he raised a further objection saying that all violence is unjust so we should not attempt to distinguish between just and unjust acts of violence. Still, he continued to work with Human Rights Forum, taking on responsibilities actively.

At a stage when even the Communists were wondering whether there was any land left for distributing to the poor, Naren started the “Movement for Implementation of Land Reforms”, taking along Dalit groups and other activists. In his native district of Chittoor, he dug up the details of available lands one by one – ceiling surplus lands which have not been distributed to the poor, lands acquired by landlords through bogus settlement titles and so on – adding up to thousands of acres, and went after Collectors and Joint Collectors. No revenue officer who worked in the district in the past few years would ever forget Naren. He also played a proactive role with the Lands Commission which was formed as per the Maoists’ recommendations after the failure of the peace initiative between them and the state government.

Once he believed in a certain principle, Naren couldn’t help following it in his own life. Having graduated with an M.A. from Delhi University he could have settled into a well-paid job and then received public accolades by speaking and writing about progressive ideas. But that was not in his nature. He moved back to Hyderabad. Those were days of frequent communal clashes in Hyderabad. With the belief that it is not enough to just condemn communal ideology and communal politics but that it is essential to organize and agitate for much-needed civic amenities in the Old City area, he joined Hyderabad Ekta. He immersed himself in organizing free clinics in the old city.

When it was clear to him that Hyderabad was not his arena of action, he moved to his native village Venktrampuram in Chittoor district along with his wife and companion Uma Shankari who shared most of his ideas. While engaged in agriculture as a farmer, he continued his work for social causes. He campaigned against liquor and worked with the poor on giving up their addiction. He organised inter-caste weddings, and went from village to village campaigning against discriminatory practices such as the “two-glass system” and succeeded in many places. When he found that there were several villages where Dalits had never cast their votes, he campaigned successfully to get special voting booths established in Dalitwadās.

As a farmer, he responded to the wrong policy approaches which undermined agriculture through neglect and a flawed development paradigm. As always, he believed that it was not enough to criticize the government, that we should put in our own efforts to address the situation. In his own land, he practiced experimental organic agriculture without using chemical pesticides and fertilizers. He learnt by experience the practical difficulties of a single farmer attempting organic farming. Though he faced disappointments, he never despaired because of his self-deprecating nature and ability to make fun of himself even in difficult situations. He wrote a book in Telugu about his experiences, titled, “Itlu Oka Raithu” (Yours truly, A farmer), published recently by Hyderabad Book Trust.

Ever since the beginning of power sector reforms a decade ago, Naren developed a response as a farmer using electricity and as an activist. He studied the issues deeply and

educated the public. He attended the public hearings of the Electricity Regulatory Commission regularly every year with detailed analysis, critique and suggestions. He used to train his colleagues and cajole them to ensure their participation.

While it is now commonplace to agitate about the displaced and project-affected communities, Naren worked on the displacement issue twenty five years ago at the time of the Srisaillam dam project when entire villages were summarily vacated. He gathered information by talking to the affected people, and set up debates. He always liked to bring issues to debate among the people. Rather than attend meetings in cities, he preferred going from village to village by foot. Even as his brain cancer worsened by formation of secondary tumors, he enthusiastically participated in foot marches against Singareni open cast mining projects in Karimnagar district.

Not only did Naren do all this work, but he did it with a smile. A child-like smile was his hallmark. He would cheerfully bring difficult issues to debate. When Narendranath attended an organizational meeting, everyone knew that he intended to bring up some debate. He used to argue persistently but never demeaned others. In our movements and organizations, we often come across those who consider hurting the other party as winning the argument. This is an important reason for organizations splitting when faced with disagreements. Naren's nature was completely different from this. This was true about him not only within organizations and movements, but also in social conflicts. He hated injustice but he never hated any individual. I believe this is what he understood as Gandhism. I don't know how far Gandhi followed this principle, but Narendranath followed it wholeheartedly. He proved that we can be partners in the fight for justice without losing our humanity and good nature to the smallest extent.

When paying tributes posthumously, it is common to describe a person as 'extraordinary.' But in the true sense of the word, there are only a few extraordinary people in the world. Gorrepati Narendranath was one of them. It is truly heartbreaking that cancer has taken away such a person from the world when he was just 57.



What I learnt from Naren

Harsh Mander

Published in The Hindu, 26-September 2009.

In his thirties, Naren returned to his village, to work on his farms and pursue a quiet life of service. He was born into a landlord family. His father, unwilling to alter the rules of the caste society of the village, refused to allow Dalits to enter the kitchen or sit at their table. Naren too was stubborn, but in his gentle way. The satyagraha he crafted was uniquely his: in all his years in the village while his father was alive, he ate his food on the kitchen floor, not on the dining table, and when there were Dalit visitors, they ate with him on the floor. His wife and two young daughters joined him in this practice. So that his father was not lonely when he ate, Naren would sit with him at the table when he had his meals, but not eat himself. Only later would he eat, seated on the floor.

Narendranath Gorrepati, or Naren as we called him, breathed his last a few months ago, succumbing calmly on July 5, 2009 to a malevolent brain tumour. I was among his devastated family and close friends who gathered by his side, as his life ebbed away. We knew he was widely loved, but none of us was prepared for the crowds that gathered as news of his death spread. His body was taken to his village Venkatramapuram in Chittoor, Andhra Pradesh. Overnight people had prepared posters saluting him. The District Collector and senior officials observed silence in respect to his memory, which had never happened for a non-official in living memory. Hundreds of people joined his funeral procession. It was as though every home in the village, Dalit or upper caste, had lost their own son or brother.

Touching lives

I had known, loved and admired Naren for three decades now. But I had not suspected the extent to which he had touched — and illuminated — so many lives. There are very few who wear their goodness so lightly, so casually on their shoulders, as did Naren. I decided then to set out to rediscover my friend, after he left us. And in so doing, he taught me many lessons, of life and of goodness.

Naren was in university in Delhi with me, a few years my senior. He joined as an officer in the State Bank of Hyderabad, but was restless from the start. He resigned in five years, and initially worked for Lokayan in Delhi in 1980, at half his bank salary. He then moved to Hyderabad, with his wife and life-long soul-mate Uma Shankari. He soon involved himself in efforts to document the suffering of people displaced by the Srisailem mega-project, and joined efforts for communal harmony in Hyderabad.

Crucial decision

A series of personal tragedies — the loss of Uma's father, and Naren's mother in a fire accident — pushed them to take the next decision, changing the rest of their lives. Uma recalls, "Somehow death became certain, life very, very uncertain. We realised that whatever good things we want to do, we should do today, now. We planned therefore to follow our hearts: go to our village, look after the lands with organic farming, and continue Naren's social work." So in 1987, the family returned to Venkatramapuram, where they lived until Naren took ill this year. Naren's father joined them, they sent their elder daughter Samyuktha to school in Chennai, and raised their younger Lakshmi in the village until she grew older.

Naren was disillusioned by funded NGOs, so he crafted his own mode of social engagement, what Uma calls "a kind of Gandhian swadeshi-swaraj model. He believed that apart from taking care modestly of their own families, everybody should do some public work. It could be on a very small scale, restricted maybe to a panchayat or even a village. He also felt there were enough resources, funds for public work within even the poorest communities in India; it is just that people are not inspired to contribute these." Naren decided to work within the district, without any funding.

He was troubled by oppression of Dalits, and joined hands with friends for a padayatra, or foot- march, through many villages, where they documented practices of untouchability like barriers to drawing water from the village well or worship at the temple, symbolically breaking the separate cups for Dalits at tea stalls. He contributed

invaluably to land reforms, countering conventional wisdom that there was no land left to be distributed to the landless, by painstakingly identifying — over many years — 40,000 acres of lands in the district, which were legally surplus but still held by landlords, and also temple lands. He would on an average day leave home at dawn and return by the last bus, travelling to villages and collecting evidence in land cases, which he would present to district officials every week. And when all else would fail, he would join the peaceful but forceful occupation of these lands by the poor. Naren would be at the forefront when the police would use force.

Unconventional

Naren firmly believed in organic ecological farming, therefore he cultivated his own fields experimenting with these technologies, defying conventional market wisdom. His own travails and losses taught him first-hand the sufferings of farmers, about which he campaigned extensively, and wrote a Telugu book *Itlu Oka Raithu*. He contributed to village self-rule by reviving and participating in village settlement of family and land disputes. He fought the destruction of crops by elephants in ways that would protect both the elephants, by creating a corridor for them, and victims who lost crops, by adequate compensation. He resisted and helped reverse heavy electricity tariffs on farmers.

Naren had phenomenal moral energy but he was not a moralist, as Vijay Pratap, another friend recalls. He was never judgemental about others; he did not make other persons feel small for the choices they were making. Yet he was resolute and uncompromising in the pursuit of his own convictions. He strived to practise every idea he preached; he was not always successful, but he always tried.

Even much more important than what he contributed to his people, was how he related with them. Dalit families recall how Naren used to routinely visit their homes, eat with them and wash his own plate. He helped educate many Dalit children and youth, and encouraged inter-caste weddings. In his own home, everyone was welcome and fed generously, even as Uma sometimes argued with him about how they would make ends meet. He sent mangoes from their orchard every year to all: to comrades, and officials, but never forgot all the poorer people who had no mango gardens of their own — the washer-folk, barbers, potters, smiths, carpenters, mechanics, and school teachers.

Everyone's friend

His comrade Rajni Bakshi recalls how he uniquely crossed all boundaries: everyone was his friend — the police, government officials, Naxals, RSS members, Communists, Ambedkarites, Dalits, casteists, even the very persons whose lands they were claiming

for assigning to the poor. Human rights activist Balagopal recalls, “To Gandhians he spoke of class struggle. To Naxalites he spoke about the immorality of violence.” Both mourn him inconsolably today.

There are perhaps many who did more than Naren for land reforms, for organic farming, for Dalit equity. But what made Naren different was that all the work he accomplished, he did with humility and great love. He carried no rancour against those he fought. “Naren did not work for a mere acre of land or more wages or better farm prices or subsidies. He worked for truth, justice and love.”

In the months since I wept by his bedside, bereft as his last breath left him, these are the lessons — of life and goodness — that I learnt from my friend Naren.

